

Be Children of the Light - Kent Dunnington
St. Paul's Free Methodist Church
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1 Samuel 16:1-13; Psalm 23; Ephesians 5:8-14; John 9:1-41

The Lord tells Samuel: *I don't see like you see; you see the outward appearance, but I see the heart.* Paul tells the Ephesians: *Once you were in the dark, now you are in the light; live as children of light.* The once-blind beggar tells the Pharisees: *One thing I do know, I was blind but now I see.*

All of our lectionary readings this morning are about seeing; they are about darkness and light, blindness and sight. As is fitting during the season of Lent, these readings are also about sin. In these texts, sin is revealed to be a vision problem. Sin is being in the dark. Sin is a kind of blindness. Especially for those of us who are part of the so-called Wesleyan tradition, these texts should give us pause. For this is not how we have tended to think about sin.

I was born and bred in the Wesleyan tradition. I grew up in a denomination called the Church of the Nazarene. For those who don't know anything about that denomination, it is basically the same as the Free Methodist denomination, only bigger...stronger, faster and better looking. Really they *are* basically the same except for some minor polity differences. I suspect the two denominations have not merged mainly because it would complicate the pastoral pension plans. They are both denominations that grew out of a movement in the mid- to late-19th century called the Holiness Movement and both are allied with what is called the Wesleyan tradition. Both denominations were known for the same two signature calling cards in their early years: first, a radical commitment to the poor, and second, a radical commitment to the doctrine of entire sanctification.

It is this doctrine of entire sanctification that is responsible for giving us a certain view of sin. Even if you have never heard of the doctrine of entire sanctification or don't subscribe to it, your view of sin may well be shaped by it. I grew up hearing a lot about entire sanctification. As I was taught, it was possible for a Christian not only to be saved from condemnation but also to be made perfectly holy before God. Getting saved from condemnation is called justification; getting made perfectly holy is called sanctification. The whole thing was called "getting saved and sanctified."

Wesley himself did not use the language of entire sanctification nearly so much as the language of Christian perfection, but the basic idea was the same: "When Jesus said 'Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect' he meant it; and he wouldn't have told us to do something that was impossible; therefore it really is possible to be perfectly holy before God in this life." So Wesley argued.

Now in order to sustain this logic, Wesley had to make a very important decision about how sin is defined. He had to make sin very much something that was subject to our moral efforts. He had to be sure that sin was not the sort of thing that could take you by surprise or sneak up on

you. Sin had to be something always in front of you that you could identify and then resist. So here is Wesley's definition of sin: "Sin is a willful transgression of a known law of God."

Even if you do not believe in entire sanctification, there is a good chance you still believe in Wesley's definition of sin as a willful transgression of a known law of God. You believe that sin is doing something you know you are not supposed to do or failing to do something you know you are supposed to do. You believe that sin is about committing certain bad acts or omitting certain good acts. In that respect, you are still a good Wesleyan. In that respect also, the Pharisees in our text this morning would have made good Wesleyans.

As is so often the case, we are meant to see ourselves in the Pharisees we read about today. As a general rule, if you find yourself disgusted with the Pharisees, you are not reading the Bible right. We are the Pharisees.

It is a healing story. There is a beggar who is blind. The disciples ask Jesus whose sin is responsible for this man's blindness, but Jesus says that is not how sin and blindness are related. "Then Jesus spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes" (John 9:6). And after going to wash the mud off, the man was healed! He could see! And there was much rejoicing.

But the Pharisees were having a hard time rejoicing. They were having a hard time because the thing they were supposed to be rejoicing about was all wrapped up with a willful transgression of a known law of God: You do not work on the Sabbath! Since healing might entail work, Jewish law forbade healing on the Sabbath except to save a life. Not only did Jesus' healing of the blind man not save a life, but also it clearly entailed work. There were 39 categories of work that were against Sabbath law, and one was called "kneading," any mixing together of ingredients to form a compound. Jesus had done some kneading when he mixed his saliva with mud. Jesus knew by kneading and then healing he was in clear violation of Sabbath law, but he did it anyway. And now everyone was celebrating! Jesus is the one who engaged in a willful transgression of a known law of God. The Pharisees wanted to be clear they were going to hold the line on sin even if everyone around them was caught up in the moment.

It is hard for us to sympathize with the Pharisees only because we do not have such strong convictions about kneading on the Sabbath. But we have our own convictions, don't we? Like the Pharisees who were divided among themselves about whether this healing was holy or sinful, the Christian church is divided today. Gay marriage, women in ministry, Christians in the military, contraception, free market capitalism, drugs and alcohol, religious pluralism, and on and on. We can't all be right. At least some of us are still holding the line on what we are convinced is a known law of God, and perhaps we would hold that line even if it meant condemning Jesus himself. At least some of us are in the dark, right? But Paul calls all of us to be children of light. What can we do?

It will not help to abandon all convictions lest we ever be found on the side of the Pharisees. That is impossible! To abandon one conviction is to adopt another. You cannot abandon the conviction that contraception is unholy without adopting the conviction that it is lawful. We cannot escape convictions, which means some of us are in the dark. It probably means that all of

us are bound to be in the dark in one way or another. But Paul calls us *all* to be children of light. What can we do?

I hope you are beginning to see why thinking about sin as a willful transgression of a known law of God is too narrow. We simply don't always know what God wants. This is what Samuel learned and what the Pharisees refused to learn. We can be wrong. We can be so wrong that we would reject Jesus when he is standing in front of us. And this is true not just for big social-political issues like gay marriage and contraception. This is true in the most ordinary moments of our lives. Sometimes we think we are being noble and courageous when we are in fact being selfish and proud. Sometimes we think we are being kind when we are in fact being cowardly. Sometimes we think we are being honest when we are in fact being malicious or resentful. Sometimes we think we are being wise when we are in fact being fearful. Lots of times we think we are in the light when we are really in the dark. Lots of times we think we see when we are really blind. So then what does it mean to be children of the light?

Let us be clear. Our existence as Christians is still mired in darkness and evil (McGill). How can we say otherwise? Samuel was a prophet of God yet he could not see as God saw. He was blind. The Pharisees were prophets and teachers of God, pastors and theologians, pious and godly people, but they could not see as God saw. They were blind. We are their stand-ins today. Our lives are as mired in blindness as theirs.

The best indication that we are being brought into the presence of the One who calls himself the light of the world is quite often a growing sense of the darkness of our own lives. This is why Bonhoeffer says that every Christian should say that he is the chief of sinners. To be children of the light is not only to be turned toward the light of Christ; it is also to be continually led into an ever-deepening awareness of the darkness in which we have lived and may continue to live. To be children of the light is to hope that in the light that Jesus shines on us we may be graced to see that what we called sight was really blindness.

This is why every morning of the world in churches and living rooms, in prison cells and offices, Christians begin their days with the confession of sin. We do not do so because we are defeatist or because we doubt that there is victory in Jesus. We do not do so because we doubt the power of free will or wish to minimize our calling to holy exertion. We do so because we know that we are always, like Samuel and the Pharisees, tempted to believe that we see when we are in fact blind. And we know the nature of light is to expose and such exposure is itself our salvation. We do so because we know that holiness is not about screwing up our willpower, and doing what we are convinced is right, nearly so much as it is about staying near to Jesus.

Repentance therefore is the primary posture of the children of light. If we say, "We have nothing to repent of; we have not violated a known law of God," then we remain with the Pharisees in the dark. As Jesus said to them and to us, "If you say, 'We see,' your sin remains."

Repentance is the Christian way of seeing. When we repent, we say, "We do not see. We are surely blind. Jesus, shine your light on us and help us see." We repent even when we do not know what we have done wrong, because we know we do not see clearly and we wish to be exposed before God. We do not wish to be exposed because we are gluttons for punishment.

Rather we wish to be exposed because Jesus is light and we want to be near Jesus. We repent in contrition because we know that we are still mired in darkness and evil. *But* we also repent with great joy because we know that faithful repentance is all we must do to be near to Jesus. True repentance is our way of seeing better! True repentance is our way of staying near to Jesus! And if we stay near to Jesus we are saved, for he is the way to the Father, the truth that dispels lies, the life that defeats death, and the light that overcomes darkness. Amen!