

CHRIST MEMORIAL EPISCOPAL CHURCH, NORTH BROOKFIELD, MA

SERMON—Rev. Dr. Paula Winsor Sage

MARCH 26, 2017

4th SUNDAY OF LENT

John 9:1-41

PRAYER: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you Lord and help us to know you better. AMEN

How do you go about convincing somebody to believe something you believe is really good for them –especially, that is, if you think they might not want to do it?

You may have more than one method, but I'll be willing to bet that you think a bit about what will work—what will convince them to agree. It might depend on who it is, of course, whether it is a child or a spouse or a parent or a co-worker or an employee, or your boss.

I am sure you can remember lots of examples of trying to persuade a child or a friend that you were trying to tell them something it was important for them to believe and act on for their own good. Sometimes we try to persuade by flattery and rewards; other times we try to persuade by threats and even by violence.

Some only by truth; others think lies are ok if for a good reason. Sometimes we

try to persuade by throwing dirt on those speaking against our view. Advertising Empires rise and fall based on how well they develop strategies to persuade us that one product is better for us than another. It is very important, I think, as we try to decide what is true and real, to know how to judge whether someone is telling the truth or not. One way which can help us is to consider the methods Jesus used in scripture to persuade those he encountered and compare them to methods used by others trying to persuade us to believe in them in our world today.

It is safe to say that, as long as human beings inhabit the earth and have a measure of freedom and try to work out how to live together, we will continue to develop ways to try to persuade each other to believe our view of what is good and true. Some will use honest means; others will not. Some will use truth and love; others will use threats and coercion.

Now, you may be wondering how that connects to today's Gospel—or you may have figured it out. From the time God created us and put us together here on

earth, because in his plan he gave us free will, He has been spending a lot of time trying to persuade us—by both sweet promises and some gentle threats—that it is for our good if we believe in Him and obey Him. It starts in the garden of Eden! Scripture is filled with the stories of first God and then Jesus trying one way after another to secure the faithfulness of His people—with reports of his few successes and many failures. Jesus spent roughly three years of his short time here on earth traveling around trying to persuade those he met of just these things—that he really is the son of God and His representative here on earth, and that he is carrying the love of his father to us which is free for the asking and only requires that we believe in it and try to follow his simple teaching. The Gospels are filled with examples of his many attempts to convince us—using a variety of means—but never dishonest or coercive ones. Today’s Gospel is one type of strategy God planned to try to convince others to believe in Him and his Son—a living example. We are told that Jesus encounters a man blind from birth. His disciples, all observant Jews who believed that the sins of the parents were

inherited by their children, asked him which of his parents had sinned. Before doing anything, Jesus says clearly that nobody sinned, and that, "The man was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him." In other words, Jesus says through healing this man he will show us that He is the Messiah and what it means to believe. (I am sure that Jesus does not say here that every time someone is born with a disability it is to reveal God's works. But he does say it was true in this case and part of God's chosen method to help us not to remain blind.) So, as the story goes, Jesus spits in the dirt, rubs it on the man's eyes and tells him to go and wash it off and he will see. Of course it worked and the man returned able to see! But this cure started great arguments over who Jesus really was and whether he really had cured the man. Because the man had always been blind, it was more difficult to argue that he had not been cured. The man himself, of course, believed that he was cured and knew who did it, and was open to learn more about Jesus. The Pharisees, the Jewish educated elders, had a great deal of trouble believing this. The man's parents didn't want to talk about it

or testify to the truth of his cure, because they were afraid of being cast out of the synagogue by the Pharisees.

This gospel is quite long. Much time is spent showing how different characters believe or do not believe what has happened. Certainly it is partly about the power of God to heal through his son, but, if it were only about Jesus curing the man blind from birth, it would have been much shorter. More of the story is about who can SEE and who is BLIND in many senses of that word—in other words what belief in God looks like and how it changes us. There is no doubt that the formerly blind man now sees—both physically and spiritually. He calls Jesus a prophet and later tells him directly that he believes. The Pharisees see Jesus as an imposter, and think that others are blind to Jesus' attempt to trick people to believe in him and his father by the miracle he performed—that of being the light of the world and bringing light to another who was in the dark. The parents do not see—they are caught between two attempts to persuade them to believe, that Jesus and the miracle their son experienced through Jesus is true or not;

they choose to remain blind out of fear. That is a choice many people today make also.

Jesus concludes this Gospel story by saying directly, “I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.” We are reminded again that we have a CHOICE. The blind man lived in darkness and had no choice; Jesus healed him and thereby gave him the choice. He chose the light. The Pharisees tell him they are sure they are not blind. Jesus disagrees and says that if they were blind they would not have sin, but because they SAY they see they remain in sin. That is a confusing response at first, but it makes sense after a bit of thought. When one is blind, he cannot see anyone else—but he can see himself; his eyes turn inward, where it is dark. As long as our eyes are turned inward, we can only see ourselves and our own needs, and trust in our own power; we cannot see the needs of others, and we cannot see God and we do not look toward the light—so we are blind. By the end of this story, the parents and Pharisees, who could see at the beginning were blind, and

the blind man could see. If we do not turn our eyes toward God and others, as the blind man did, we too will remain in darkness, and therefore blind, separated from God—which is the definition of sin. In this Gospel, Jesus tells us at the beginning that he is going to show us through healing a blind man what it means to SEE and to believe in the power of God. God has given us all a choice. Lent is a time for us to pause and either commit or recommit to turn our eyes and look outwards toward the light instead of inwards into our own darkness. AMEN.