

"The Mud of Life"
Reverend Bill Gause
Overbrook Presbyterian Church
4th Sunday in Lent
March 26, 2017

First Scripture Reading: Psalm 23

¹The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. ²He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; ³he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. ⁴Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff— they comfort me. ⁵You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. ⁶Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.

Second Scripture Reading: John 9:1-34

¹As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. ²His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" ³Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. ⁴We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. ⁵As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." ⁶When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, ⁷saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see.

⁸The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?" ⁹Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him." He kept saying, "I am the man." ¹⁰But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" ¹¹He answered, "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' Then I went and washed and received my sight." ¹²They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know."

¹³They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. ¹⁴Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. ¹⁵Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, "He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see." ¹⁶Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath." But others said, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" And they were divided. ¹⁷So they said again to the blind man, "What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened." He said, "He is a prophet." ¹⁸The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight ¹⁹and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" ²⁰His parents answered, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; ²¹but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself." ²²His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. ²³Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him." ²⁴So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, "Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner." ²⁵He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." ²⁶They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" ²⁷He answered them, "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?" ²⁸Then they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we

are disciples of Moses. ²⁹We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.” ³⁰The man answered, “Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. ³¹We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. ³²Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. ³³If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.” ³⁴They answered him, “You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?” And they drove him out.



Sermon: “The Mud of Life”

This is a story about time. Yes, it’s also a miraculous story about faith, and about healing, and about the doubts of those religious authorities who felt challenged and threatened by Jesus, but most of all it is about time. A time before and a time after.

In this story from the gospel of John, a man who was blind from birth meets Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus, in perhaps the grossest, most unceremonious way possible, opens the man’s eyes with mud made from saliva and dirt and allows him to see.

This story always reminds me of Naaman, the Aramaean General who was told by the prophet Elisha to wash himself seven times in the waters of the Jordan river to cure his leprosy. Naaman balked at the idea because he expected a grand display of prayers and sacrifices. Had he known he would be asked to wash in a river, and a fairly dirty one at that, he could have stayed at home.¹ Like Naaman, the people of Jesus’ time expected miracles of healing to be big, elaborate affairs. But Jesus does something simple and earthy and unexpected, and afterwards, the man who once was blind, now can see.

And as unbelievable as that is to us in 2017... and it does stretch the bounds of credibility, the people alive at that time in that place who knew the man and could see that he had been given his sight, found it *almost impossible* to believe.

First his neighbors start asking if this man who can clearly see, is the same man they knew before. They even ask if maybe he is just someone else that looks like that other guy who couldn’t see. And he tells them “No, it really is me.”

“Then how did you get your sight?” They ask. And so the previously blind man tells the story of Jesus using dirt and spit to open his eyes.

Then the Pharisees call him in and ask the same question: “How did you receive your sight?”. And the man repeats the story of Jesus and the mud on his eyes. The Pharisees point out that healing is work, and this healing took place on the Sabbath. “He can’t be of God if he works on the Sabbath ... [But,] how can he heal like this if he is a sinner?”

The Pharisees seem to think that maybe this is some kind of trick; that maybe this man was not really blind. So, they go and ask his parents, “Is this your son who you say was born blind? If so, how is that now he can see?” But the parents don’t know either. All they can say is, “Yes, this is our son,” and “Yes, he was born blind but if you want to know more, you’re going to have to ask him”.

¹ 2 Kings 5:1-14, NRSV

And so they do. With dogged persistence, the Pharisees go back to the young man and say to him “This man you say healed you is a sinner.” But the newly sighted young man says to them, “I don’t know anything about that. All I know is that I was once blind, but now I see.”

“How?” The Pharisees demand to know. “*How did he open your eyes?*” And the man replies “I’ve told you already but you didn’t want to hear it.”

Again, and again they ask. What happened? How did the blind man receive his sight? It is a miracle that they do not understand because it does not seem to fit the way they think God acts and the kinds of people through whom God chooses to work.

The Pharisees want to know how someone so disrespectful of the Sabbath law could be able to tap into the healing powers of God who instituted that law. They are concerned that they are being tricked, that what is being claimed is not what has actually happened.

But all the man can tell them is this: *I was blind. Now I see.* And that movement from one to the other is all that matters.

As Anna Carter Florence has written,

*This passage is about... before and after, then and now, who we were for years and years and who we are today. The moment of conversion itself is not as important as the difference it made: I once was lost but now am found.*²

It can be easy to get lost in the details of how and why. But what really matters is that something very profound has changed. We see this in the story of the prodigal son, too. The older brother wants to argue about where the younger son has been and what he has been doing. He wants to argue the merits of one versus the other and what each of the brothers has earned. But all that matters to the father is that the younger brother was lost and is now found. How that came to pass is immaterial.

Which can be hard for us to swallow. We put a lot of emphasis on actions and motives; on what we have earned and on what we deserve. If you do good things, good things should happen to you. If you hurt someone else, you have to make amends. Motives matter. Actions matter.

But the nature of Grace is that what came before is no longer held against us. The events that caused our repentance do not matter in the grand scheme. All that matters is that we *were* alienated from God but *now* we are reconciled to God.

In this season of Lent, we are called to self-examination. We are invited to seek out the places where we have denied Jesus with our actions as well as our words; the times when we have failed to be what we were created to be. The times when we were blind to God’s will and deaf to God’s word. It is a time when we invite conversion, when we open ourselves up to the working of God’s Holy Spirit and seek out the ways in which we might be changed.

How that occurs and to whom may be confounding; inexplicable.

² Florence, Anna Carter. "John 9:1-41, Homiletical Perspective." *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 2*. Ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville (Ky.): Westminster John Knox, 2011. 119. Print.

I was scrolling around on the internet last week and I found an amazing video of a lecture given by Megan Phelps-Roper. If that name sounds familiar it's because she is the grand-daughter of Fred Phelps, the founder and pastor of Westboro Baptist Church. If you've never heard of Westboro, well, maybe consider yourself fortunate.

Adrian Chen, writing for the *New Yorker*, shared Megan's story in November 2015. He writes:

As a member of the Westboro Baptist Church, in Topeka, Kansas, Phelps-Roper believed that AIDS was a curse sent by God. She believed that all manner of other tragedies—war, natural disaster, mass shootings—were warnings from God to a doomed nation, and that it was her duty to spread the news of His righteous judgments. To protest the increasing acceptance of homosexuality in America, the Westboro Baptist Church picketed the funerals of gay men who died of AIDS and of soldiers killed in Iraq and Afghanistan. Members held signs with slogans like “God hates fags” and “thank God for dead soldiers,” and the outrage that their efforts attracted had turned the small church, which had fewer than a hundred members, into a global symbol of hatred.³

Megan Phelps-Roper says that she was an ardent supporter of Westboro's agenda from her earliest days. Describing her first involvement with her family's church she says:

I was a blue-eyed, chubby-cheeked five-year-old when I joined my family on the picket line for the first time. My mom made me leave my dolls in the minivan. I'd stand on a street corner in the heavy Kansas humidity, surrounded by a few dozen relatives, with my tiny fists clutching a sign that I couldn't read yet: ‘Gays are worthy of death.’⁴

As she grew older, she says, she embraced that agenda with a certain zeal. All of the pain and hurt that Westboro has caused in its quest to point out just how unclean the rest of the world is, Megan Phelps-Roper was right there in the middle of it.

Until one day in 2012 when she wasn't any more. Over a long period time other people, Christians and Jews and Muslims and people of many faiths and of no particular faith, reached out to her through social media, and through their patient, caring acts of love, she changed. It didn't happen overnight. It was a gradual, lengthy process. Here is part of the story in her own words:

My friends on Twitter took the time to understand Westboro's doctrines and in doing so, they were able to find inconsistencies I'd missed my entire life. Why did we advocate the death penalty for gays when Jesus said, ‘Let he who is without sin cast the first stone?’ How could we claim to love our neighbor while at the same time praying for God to destroy them? The truth is that the care shown to me by these strangers on the internet was itself a contradiction. It was growing evidence that people on the other side were not the demons I'd been led to believe.

³ Chen, Adrian. "Unfollow: How a Prized Daughter of the Westboro Baptist Church Came to Question Its Beliefs." *New Yorker* 23 Nov. 2015: n. pag. *The New Yorker*. The New Yorker, 28 Sept. 2016. Web. 27 Mar. 2017. <<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/11/23/conversion-via-twitter-westboro-baptist-church-megan-phelps-roper>>.

⁴ Phelps-Roper, Megan. "I Grew up in the Westboro Baptist Church. Here's Why I Left." *TED.com*. TED Conferences, LLC, Feb. 2017. Web. 27 Mar. 2017. <https://www.ted.com/talks/megan_phelps_roper_i_grew_up_in_the_westboro_baptist_church_here_s_why_i_left>.

These realizations were life-altering. Once I saw that we were not the ultimate arbiters of divine truth but flawed human beings, I couldn't pretend otherwise. I couldn't justify our actions — especially our cruel practice of protesting funerals and celebrating human tragedy. These shifts in my perspective contributed to a larger erosion of trust in my church, and eventually it made it impossible for me to stay.⁵

There are those for whom the story of someone like Megan Phelps-Roper is unsatisfying. They will want to know how she changed and why. They will question her motives and the sincerity of her repentance. But perhaps most importantly, they will want to know what price has she paid for her actions for all of the hurt and pain she helped to spread?

Phelps-Roper even acknowledges the uphill climb she faces. In a blog post shortly after she left Westboro she wrote this quote from *The Dark Knight Rises*:⁶

There's no fresh start in today's world. Any twelve-year-old with a cell phone could find out what you did. Everything we do is collated and quantified. Everything sticks.⁷

In a world with a long memory that seems to grow longer each day, our pasts can be hard to escape. A fresh start can be difficult to find.

But that is exactly what God offers us. All of us. Megan Phelps-Roper was an agent of hate. Today she is working for peace and reconciliation. *How* that change occurred is not so important as the fact that it did. In Jesus, we encounter something transformative. That is the amazing grace of which we sing.

But what can be so challenging is accepting that grace, certainly for ourselves and maybe more-so for others. Grace is the act of forgiveness that allows us to begin again; to move on and continue to develop and become what it is God intends for us. But all too often, the real barrier to that new life can be others who refuse to accept that transformation.

We embrace God's mercy and compassion for us, but we find it a little bit more difficult to allow that mercy and compassion for others.

But for some, the opposite is true. The burden of past mistakes is difficult to escape. Guilt and regret can be powerful and cumbersome things. Through grace, mercy and steadfast love, God sets us free from whatever it is we have done wrong, no matter how hurtful and troubling to ourselves or to others. But it can be really hard to let go. All of that guilt and regret can become like a heavy stone that we lug around with us because we think it's our well-deserved punishment.

When we learn that we are forgiven, the words can sound hollow since we are really the ones who need to forgive *us*. We can ask "how?". We can ask "why?". However, in the final analysis none of that really

⁵ Phelps-Roper, Megan. "I Grew up in the Westboro Baptist Church. Here's Why I Left."

⁶ *The Dark Knight Rises*. Dir. Christopher Nolan. Perf. Christian Bale, Tom Hardy, Anne Hathaway. Warner Brothers/20th Century Fox, 2012. Film.

⁷ Phelps-Roper, Megan. "Head Full of Doubt / Road Full of Promise." Blog post. *Megan Phelps-Roper*. Medium.Com, 06 Feb. 2013. Web. 27 Mar. 2017. <<https://medium.com/@meganphelps/head-full-of-doubt-road-full-of-promise-83d2ef8ba4f5#.tpw43576l>>.

matters. “By Grace you have been save.” All that matters is that once you were one thing, and now you are something else.

In Christ, there is transformation, healing, grace. Accepting that for ourselves *and* for others is the Lenten disciple we have to undertake. You know why it’s so hard to get a fresh start? Because we won’t allow it. Do you know why “everything sticks?” Because we make everything sticky. We’ve always got our glue-sticks out ready, prepared to cut-out and paste the misdeeds of the world like memories in a scrap book.

I still have a friend back home that reminds me of everything I ever did wrong as a teenager, every time I see him. For him, there is no future, there is only the past. But you can’t live in the past. The past is a memory. We learn from it, and we move on. Who and what we once were is not important. Who we are now, is important.

This is a story about time: Moving from a time that was, to the time that is. How that transformation occurs may be impossible to understand. But the miracle of grace is that we don’t need to understand it. How we got here is not so important as the fact that, by the grace of God, we are here. We just have to accept it, both for ourselves and for others.

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.