

A Lent 4 2017 John 9:1-41

We've been watching a lot of ESPN lately. Well Bill has been watching and I have been listening with a half an ear while I am doing something else. (By the way I am ahead of Bill on my March madness brackets. It just goes to show you that any fool can fill them out!)

Anyway on Friday morning, a human interest story about South Carolina's basketball coach Frank Martin caught my attention. He's best known for his volatility and deadly stare. An ESPN writer once wrote: *You know the look. Those loony eyes. The crumpled lips. A cage fighter's stance. Your-mom-just-found-the-report-card-you-tried-to-hide eyebrows.* (Myron Medcalf ESPN Staff Writer Dec. 16, 2014)

At any moment, it seems, South Carolina's leader will erupt and spit fire from his mouth that will singe the fingertips and eyelashes of anyone nearby. His intensity did him well back in the day when he was earning extra money as a bouncer. So this is how most people who don't know him, see him: the fiery sideline coach.

But off the court, he's somebody that you don't have to change yourself for. ([Tyronne Johnson](#), a senior guard.) *"You can be you around him. He jokes, he laughs. He's one of the nicest dudes off the court.* ESPN interview his wife and kids, who described him as *a loving father who helps with math homework, a giant teddy bear.* His kids say they *constantly explain to friends he isn't a tyrant, more like a giant hug, kind of soft.*

His colleagues say he is *loud but positive. Nicest, kindest, smartest, man.*

Now I know that this is PR before a game but it bears testimony to the labels we all live with and place on others. Good or bad, labels limit us.

I saw a video this week of a little girl who was kissed by the Pope and then she reached for his skull cap. The pope took it with good humor but already the 3 year old is being referred to as the girl who stole the Pope's hat. Will that be her whole legacy in life?

Pam Garman gave me a sticker the other day that says *"Labels are for jars not people."* We can be labeled by our past, our circumstance, our abilities, our mistakes, our words, or some event in our lives.

One side of this, of course, is that we should not label others. However, I also want you to think about ways you too have been labeled and whether and in what ways you have internalized these labels. Is there something you can't get past? Is there something holding you back from being all that you were meant to be, as a loved child of God.

In a moment I am going to read a third encounter in the gospel of John in which Jesus meets and engages an outsider. The result is that the man's life is changed.

You get to sit again while I read. You can close your eyes. Or you can read along and mark up your bulletin.

But I do want you to listen for the labels attached to Jesus and the labels used to describe the man healed.

How do the crowd and the Pharisees view the man born blind?

Finally why is it so hard for the crowd to see this outsider, differently, in spite of the evidence?

John 9:1-41

A Man Born Blind Receives Sight

As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' Jesus answered, 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.' When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, 'Go, wash in the pool of Siloam' (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. The 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?' Some were saying, 'It is he.' Others were saying, 'No, but it is someone like him.' He kept saying, 'I am the man.' But they kept asking him, 'Then how were your eyes opened?' He 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.' They said to him, 'Where is he?' He said, 'I do not know.'

The Pharisees Investigate the Healing

They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was a Sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. Then 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.' Some 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. So 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.'

The 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 and asked them, 'Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?' His parents answered, 'We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but 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.' His 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. Therefore his parents said, 'He is of age; ask him.'

So 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.' He answered, 'I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.' They said to him, 'What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?' He 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?' Then they reviled him, saying, 'You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.' The man answered, 'Here is an

astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.’ They answered him, ‘You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?’ And they drove him out.

Spiritual Blindness

Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, ‘Do you believe in the Son of Man?’ He answered, ‘And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.’ Jesus said to him, ‘You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.’ He said, ‘Lord, I believe.’ And he worshipped him. Jesus said, ‘I came into this world for judgement so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.’ Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, ‘Surely we are not blind, are we?’ Jesus said to them, ‘If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, “We see”, your sin remains.

It just occurred to me as I read this story that really there are two outsiders: the man born blind and Jesus and that is who it was so easy to label them.

Could you hear the labels? Man born blind, dependent son parents, beggar. And Jesus too was labeled sinner.

David Lose, preacher, teacher and writer, wrote:

“In this story, it seems like it’s just really, really hard for the people around the man who received his ...to adjust to his new reality or see him for anything more than what he used to be. And so some folks don’t recognize him at all.

Others, including his parents, know what he struggled with and see his transformation but aren’t sure what to make of it.” (In the Meantime Posted: 23 Mar 2017 06:23 AM PDT)

However, I believe that both the man born blind and Jesus, embrace the future. Jesus does so by revealing himself as the Son of Man and the man who now sees, rejoices and declares **“Lord, I believe.”**

You know it is so easy to define ourselves as less than God calls us to be, as loved children of God.

Lose goes on to say: *Jesus is calling us forward. The past matters, but it is past. Jesus’ cross reminds us that the hurts, sorrows, mistakes, and regrets that have marked us may describe us, but they do not define us, for we are God’s beloved children. And Jesus’ resurrection assures us that God’s love is more powerful than our tragedies and that the future is always open.*

So think again about your own life. What label, what past history is preventing you from moving joyfully into an open future, with a loving God?

I have put some purple strips of paper in each pew and I invite you to take this opportunity to write down a “label” you have carried in your life or something of your past that you want to overcome. It might be a sin or an experience or whatever limits you to live more fully in Christ.

You can do this now or during the offering.

Nobody is going to look at them. Not even me.

I’ll shred them right after worship.

You don’t even have to write it all out.

You can just write one word or make an X that represents, between you and God, what you are ready to let go of.

What you offer to God in prayer.

Fold it up tight and then during communion, you can place it in the baptismal font, as a reminder that in our baptisms, God sees us, truly knows us and loves us still.

May you find hope knowing that in Christ you are blessed with the Easter promise that you are more than your past and that your future is open.

This is the good news of the man who sees.

This is the good news of the gospel.