

March 5, 2017

“Law & Order”

John Wesley United Methodist Church

John 9:1-41

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With my apologies to some of you in the congregation today, I'm going to start off with some good natured jokes about lawyers. First,

Q: How many lawyer jokes do you think there are?

A: None! All are true stories.

Q: What do you call a lawyer with an IQ of 100?

A: Your Honor.

Q: What do you call a lawyer with an IQ of 50

A: Senator.

Q: What's the difference between a good lawyer and a bad lawyer?

A: A bad lawyer makes your case drag on for years. A good lawyer makes it last even longer.

Q: Why won't sharks attack lawyers?

A: Professional courtesy.

Q: What's the difference between a lawyer and God?

A: God doesn't think he's a lawyer.

Now the only reason I'm telling these lawyer jokes is to set the stage for my sermon. You see, in today's Gospel reading, the Apostle John takes forty-one verses to tell the story of Jesus' healing of the man who had been blind from birth. Forty-one verses. That's why I didn't have you stand for the Gospel reading! Yet, only two of the verses deal with Jesus' actual miracle. Thirty-nine verses deal with accusations, questions, disputes, and matters of the law. The story in fact, reeks of an inquisition. So today let's examine this scripture from that perspective. Imagine yourself as an observer in a courtroom. Watching the drama of a trial. Because in a sense, this particular incident in the life of Jesus could be made into a courtroom drama, perhaps called, *Old Testament Law & Order*. With this episode called *Preserving the Letter/Killing the Spirit of the Law*. So today, sit back and watch the proceedings. The defendant of course, is Jesus Christ. The plaintiffs... you'll soon find out!

But first let me preface this drama with a very important point that will have bearing on the ultimate verdict. In nearly every courtroom in the Western world you will find a statue or a picture of Lady Justice. Can you visualize her? She stands with her left arm outstretched, holding a perfectly balanced set of scales representing her promise to weigh equally all the pertinent facts in a case. In her right hand is her sword, representing the righteousness of her verdict. And she is blindfolded. To show her perfect

impartiality. In a sense Lady Justice represents God. Because isn't God the absolutely perfect judge. Because only God is perfectly just and perfectly righteous. Now consider the enormity of this statement. Because, if you, if I, were to stand before God Almighty in judgment today, what should the perfect and just verdict be for us? (Pause) But let's get back to the trial.

First, the Crime Scene. It's Jerusalem, where Jesus has just left the temple when he and his disciples see a man blind from birth. His disciples asked Jesus, "Who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?" According to Jewish religious belief at the time, a birth defect was the result of a sin of the person or the parents. But Jesus responded, "neither." Neither. "He was born blind so that the power of God could be revealed in him. But while I am in the world, I am the light of the world." And when Jesus said this, he spat on the ground, made mud with the saliva, spread the mud on the man's eyes, then told him to go, wash in the pool of Siloam. The man went and washed, and came back with his sight restored. It should have been a cause for celebration, but the crime was, it was the Sabbath day, and no work should have been performed.

Next, the Investigation. Questions are asked. Is this really the man who was born blind? And if it is him, how was he cured? The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, "Isn't this the man who used to sit and beg?" Now some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No he only looks like him." There was general confusion and disbelief. But the man himself insisted, I am the man. And the people were demanding, and kept asking him, "Who healed you? What happened?" He replied, "The man Jesus did this to me." Jesus healed me!

Next, the Trial & Accusation. The people brought the man who had formerly been blind to the Pharisees – the prosecutors, judges and jury, in this case. It's again interesting to note here, that these "prosecutors" were not happy for the man. They did not rejoice because the man could now see. Rather, they sought to condemn Jesus. Because it was on the Sabbath that Jesus had opened the man's eyes, the Pharisees immediately accused Jesus of being a sinner, for it was against the law for "work" to be done on the Sabbath. Therefore, he could not be from God. "How can a man who is a sinner do such miraculous signs?" They focused on the letter of the law. They overlooked the magnitude of the miracle and the spirit in which it had been performed. The spirit of love, compassion and power of God.

Next, direct examination of the witnesses. The Pharisees turned to the blind man and began interrogating him. “What do you have you to say about him? It was your eyes he opened.” The blind man replied, “He is a prophet.” But the Pharisees ignored this comment and still did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight so they called for the man’s parents. “Is this your son? Was he born blind? If so, then how does he now see?” Because the parents were afraid of the Pharisees, they answered, “We know this is our son and he was born blind, but we don’t know how he can see.”

Next, the Redirect. For the second time the Pharisees called the man that had been blind, accusing Jesus and saying, “We know that this man, Jesus, is a sinner.” The demoralized blind man answered, “I don’t know whether he is a sinner or not. But I do know this: I was blind, but now I see.” Then they all hurled insults at him and said, “You must be a disciple of this Jesus. We are disciples of Moses. We know that God spoke to Moses, we don’t even know where this man comes from.” But then the blind man rebuts the Pharisees. He says, “That’s a strange thing you’re not seeing; you say you don’t know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.”

Next, Closing Arguments. The Pharisees are confident in their decision and rest their case. But then Jesus makes his dramatic closing remarks, which spectacularly turns the tables on them. “I entered this world to give sight to the blind,” he said. "And to show those who think they see... that they are the ones blind. If you were blind, you wouldn't be guilty. But you're guilty because you claim you can see." The Pharisees are aghast!

Now before the final verdict is read, and because this is Lent, I want to digress and tell you a story about a past religious tradition. In Vienna, Austria, there is a church where the once ruling family of Austria, the Habsburgs, are all buried. When a member of the monarchy died, and the royal funeral procession arrived at the church, mourners would knock at the door to be allowed in. A priest inside would ask, “Who is it is it that desires admission here?” A royal guard would call out, “The Highest Emperor.” And the priest would answer back, “I do not know him.” Then the mourners would knock a second time, and the priest would again ask, “Who is it that desires admission here?” The royal guard outside would announce, “His Imperial and Royal Majesty.” A second time the priest would say, “I do not know him.” A third time the mourners knocked at the door, and a third time the priest would ask, “Who is it?” But this time, the answer would be, “A poor sinner, like us all, your brother.” And the doors would open. This ritual was performed to remind everyone that no matter what our station in life is, no

matter what our rank in society might be, no matter who we are, we are all sinners to some degree, all flawed, all ultimately dependent on the perfect and righteous judgment of our merciful and loving God. And this is just another way of stating the truth brought home to us in the gospel reading. You see, Jesus' miracle today is meant to teach us something. That too often we are mired in the mud of our own sins. Too often we are quick to pass judgment on others. Too often we are prideful and self righteous. Yes, too often we are, figuratively, blind.

But let's get back to the verdict. We all know what the outcome should have been, don't we? That Jesus is innocent. And it's the Pharisees, and you and me, all of humanity, who are blind and who are guilty of sin, and deserve punishment. Yes, that's the way it should have gone down except for one thing. Jesus Christ appeals this decision! He appealed to God Almighty, who, as I've said, is the most perfect judge, and who would make things right with the most fitting judgment. Wouldn't He? So imagine God as He considers Jesus' appeal, holding those scales outstretched and seeing them tipped heavily by all the sins of humanity. And then imagine God letting loose His sword of righteousness as He renders His decision. But, surprisingly, astonishingly, not on humanity. Instead, on His own Son. And what was the sentence? First, Jesus was beaten and spat upon and then flogged forty times, just for good measure. Then nails were driven into the very same hands that formed the very same world that now rejected Him. And then He was hung on a cross to die. As all the sins of the world were placed squarely upon God's innocent Son!

Was it fair? No. Was it deserved? No. Was it love? Yes. Was it perfect? Yes, indeed.

Can we pray. Dear Lord Jesus, too often, we forget the enormity of the gift of our salvation and the price you paid to redeem us all. May we use this sacred time of Lent to reflect on those words of love and mercy and compassion you spoke today: "I am the light of the world. And I came into the world to give sight to those who are blind." Amen.