

St. David's Presbyterian Church  
St. John's, NL  
Dr. Jonathan Dent

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*Conversations with Jesus that may offend you*

Some people are offended fairly easily, others are not. Some people are offended when people don't take notice of them, others are offended when people do take notice of them. Some people are offended when you think they are bad and do wicked things. Others are offended when you think they are too good and don't do bad things. Some are offended when you take a drink, others are offended when you don't take a drink. Some are offended when they do not receive the respect they expect to receive. Others are offended when they perceive too much respect. Let me illustrate.

Buddy walks into a corner store and buys some milk. The attendant takes his money, gives him the right change and says, "Thank you, sir." Now you would think that was the end of the conversation and the mission was accomplished. But you would be wrong. Buddy says to the corner store worker, "What did you call me?" Upon reflection, the young man behind the counter repeated what he had said, "Thank you, sir." Buddy says, "Don't you ever call me that again. I'm not old enough to be a 'sir.'" At which point, I can't remember if the guy behind the counter said "yes, sir" to him or not. It was a strange encounter. My daughter told me a similar story. You would think saying, "thank you, sir" would hardly ever go wrong. But there it is. Too much respect or courtesy or something for this particular individual sets him off even though he must understand a common language exchange, even if he disagrees with it.

So when God becomes a human being and starts saying things to us and others, we shouldn't be too surprised if we are offended at times. Because offence, disrespect, misunderstanding, sarcasm, cynicism, happens everyday. Many of us become bitter in our life challenges, our pain, our losses, and our confusion and distress. We become resentful at the hand of cards we have been dealt. We wonder if anything will ever get better.

Jesus encounters us right where we are. This is exactly what he did with the blind man in John 9. Jesus and his disciples were passing by a man who was begging because of his disability of blindness and they have a theological discussion about why the man is blind. They wonder out loud with what they probably learned at school, or at the synagogue or temple in their day:

Who sinned to make this man blind? Someone could be blamed for this man's suffering. And sometimes we think that way too. We think we can blame a person's disability, pain or circumstances completely on that person, or someone close to them, or an enemy. Sometimes that is true. Often it is not.

In the case of the man who was blind from birth, whose name is not mentioned in this story, Jesus clearly says that he was born this way to show the work of the Lord. Now this probably refers to his healing, that is coming. But it is also true that many with disabilities, chronic health problems and challenges of many kinds can bring glory to God with their attitude toward their lives, of gratitude and of perseverance, courage and life-giving hope. I am thinking of a young woman who had a diving accident and broke her spinal cord, left a paraplegic. She was a strong believer in Jesus Christ and many tried to heal her, to no avail. Instead, she has developed a ministry of compassion and help for so many others from her wheel chair. Her name is Joni Tada-Erickson and many of you know her story. God's works have been seen through her.

But back to the man who is still blind. Jesus takes the time to approach him, something many of us find hard to do today, just taking the time to approach someone in need. Then he does something that was somewhat common in his day and culture for physicians and others who heal would do. Today it simply sounds offensive. Jesus spits in the dirt, makes a poultice of dirt and spittle, really just a little bit of mud and applies it to the man's eyes.

One teacher I heard on this passage said that this is "the spit test." It places our offense over and against the condition in which we find ourselves. Would you let someone do this to you if you were blind, or would you rather remain blind? Now the Scripture does not tell us how Jesus verbally walked this man through what happened to him. It is possible that he would do this to his eye without saying anything, but not likely. You or I would pull away instantly. I believe Jesus walked this man through what was about to happen to him.

And there are two parts to what happened to him. The first was the application of the mud, which was grace from God, although it did not seem like it at the time. The second was the choice the man had to follow through with what Jesus asked him to do. He had to go to the pool at Siloam to wash.

In our own lives, an act of offense can be the beginning to a profound and life changing healing. Many times it begins with speaking the truth, and even when lovingly delivered, it is painful.

This is true when someone is confronted with their drinking problem, with their drug addiction, with their inability to stop gambling, with a sexual addiction, with overeating to cope with anxiety, with self-destructive behaviour, with the fact that they cannot and do not control their anger.

I am listing only a very few of those things which many of us suffer and struggle with, or if not us, someone close to us. The person confronted has a choice to agree with what is being said or not. Because we can all continue in ways that do not honour God and do not bring life or health to ourselves or others. We have a choice to seek help or not. This is true of the 12 step programs. This is true of any life changing decision.

Please know there is help here in the church. We need to help each other through the hard times, through devastation, through difficult revelations. Because there will be times when others choose denial, choose to continue to self-destructive behaviour, choose their addiction before anything else in their lives. And this is painful. But it is their choice.

The man in John 9 washes his face in the pool of Siloam and can see for the first time in his life. The reactions to his healing and to his choice of a new life are interesting and informative.

First, his neighbors and those who would see him in public, begging, were the first ones to wonder if this was the same man they used to see on the curb. He assures them that he is, but they continue to wonder if in fact he is the same man. He tells them the story of what happens to him and some of them still wonder, because they do not believe. It is the same today with a person who experiences a huge life changing event that addresses their addiction, that addresses their unbelief, the one who was always skeptical becomes a firm believer in Jesus Christ and the reactions today are the same as written in this Book from another time and era.

The second group of people that encounter the blind man decide they will take him to their religious leaders, the Pharisees. The Pharisees also respond in a way that is similar to the first group. They wonder out loud whether this

event has actually occurred. They are seriously concerned that this has been done on the Sabbath, breaking their understanding of the Sabbath rules.

They miss the whole point in the story, which is that God can encounter us in surprising ways, even offensive ways, and draw us into a new life. In a word, they miss the miracle. So they interview the man who tells the same story again. They get his parents, but his parents are politically savvy and know that if they say too much they could be put out of the synagogue, so they just direct the religious leaders back to talking to their adult son.

The formerly blind man, who now has a completely new identity, asks the Pharisees why they keep asking and wonders out loud if they too want to explore a living relationship with Jesus the Messiah. Now they are offended, stating they only follow Moses, and basically tell him that his sins made him blind in the first place, and that he had no right to tell them anything. This is in spite of the fact that they were questioning him and asking what happened. Sometimes others say they want to know but they really don't want to know. This is where Jesus teaches us about our blindness and our lack of vision.

If we come to church and think we know it all or have heard it all before, then what can we receive here? Not much. But if we come, knowing our need, desiring God's touch to be transformed, to be full of life, then we may receive. Sometimes we may be offended by what we read in Scripture or by what the person teaching at the front is saying. Let us make sure we are open to what God has for us. When we are offended, let us work through the offense, for a greater perspective, and always take personal responsibility for our actions, thoughts, words and life. We have that choice.

And Jesus simply asks us if we trust him. And like the formerly blind man, we are encouraged to say, "Lord, I believe." And then worship the Lord, as he did. This is our choice, to believe and see, or to turn away and choose not to see. Let us choose wisely.

Let us pray.