

Exodus 15:22-27 ²² Then Moses led Israel from the Red Sea and they went into the Desert of Shur. For three days they traveled in the desert without finding water. ²³ When they came to Marah, they could not drink its water because it was bitter. (That is why the place is called Marah.) {23 Marah means bitter.} ²⁴ So the people grumbled against Moses, saying, "What are we to drink?" ²⁵ Then Moses cried out to the LORD, and the LORD showed him a piece of wood. He threw it into the water, and the water became sweet. There the LORD made a decree and a law for them, and there he tested them. ²⁶ He said, "If you listen carefully to the voice of the LORD your God and do what is right in his eyes, if you pay attention to his commands and keep all his decrees, I will not bring on you any of the diseases I brought on the Egyptians, for I am the LORD, who heals you." ²⁷ Then they came to Elim, where there were twelve springs and seventy palm trees, and they camped there near the water.

John 9:1-41 As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. ² His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" ³ "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life. ⁴ As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. ⁵ While I am in the world, I am the light of the world." ⁶ Having said this, he spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man's eyes. ⁷ "Go," he told him, "wash in the Pool of Siloam" (this word means Sent). So the man went and washed, and came home seeing. ¹³ They brought to the Pharisees the man who had been blind. ¹⁴ Now the day on which Jesus had made the mud and opened the man's eyes was a Sabbath. ¹⁵ Therefore the Pharisees also asked him how he had received his sight. "He put mud on my eyes," the man replied, "and I washed, and now I see." ¹⁶ Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath." But others asked, "How can a sinner do such miraculous signs?" So they were divided. ¹⁷ Finally they turned again to the blind man, "What have you to say about him? It was your eyes he opened." The man replied, "He is a prophet." Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" ³⁶ "Who is he, sir?" the man asked. "Tell me so that I may believe in him." ³⁷ Jesus said, "You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you." ³⁸ Then the man said, "Lord, I believe," and he worshiped him. ³⁹ Jesus said, "For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind." ⁴⁰ Some Pharisees who were with him heard him say this and asked, "What? Are we blind too?" ⁴¹ Jesus said, "If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains."

“The Challenge of God’s Grace”

I wonder what it would have been like be one of the ancient Israelites in the days following the plagues of Egypt and the parting of the Red Sea. They had just seen Yahweh, their God, destroy the armies of Egypt and render the Egyptian gods powerless even Pharaoh by sending plagues upon the Egyptians. It was a big celebration that turned to grumbling when they found themselves out

in the desert having wandered three days and found no water. This powerful God, Yahweh, where was he? Had he freed them only to let them wander aimlessly while fending for themselves in a desert wilderness? Three days wandering and no water, and they come to Marah and its bitter water. Why? The people grumble against Moses who cries out to Yahweh who shows Moses the stick that made the water sweet. Problem solved. Apparently, it was some sort of test...or was it that Yahweh was trying to demonstrate something to them...his faithfulness maybe?

Having drank the water they are now ready to have their faithfulness tested. Yahweh through Moses speaks to them saying “If you listen carefully to the voice of Yahweh your God and do what is right in his eyes, if you pay attention to his commands and keep all his decrees, I will not bring on you any of the diseases I brought on the Egyptians, for I am Yahweh, who heals you.” In Egypt the god they served was Pharaoh and it was slavery. They were not a nation, a people with a land. They were slaves suffering the disease of oppression. Yahweh, their true God, freed them and here declares himself to be their healer, the one who would restore them to being a great people with a land. Yet, for that healing that restoration to take place they are going to have to actually listen to Yahweh and do as he says...particularly out in the wilderness where it is a matter of life and death.

The next test they face concerns food and keeping Sabbath. They are in the Wilderness of Sin (pronounced Seen) and are out of food. They grumble wishing they had died in Egypt. Yahweh gives them manna in the morning and quails at night. But, he instructs them not to keep any of it overnight. But, some of them do and it goes rotten. He also instructs them to collect double on the sixth day because the seventh is a Sabbath for Yahweh and no one is going to do any work. The manna will keep. All they had to do was trust Yahweh and rest. But some of them went out on the seventh day to collect manna. Yahweh gives them this reminder, “How long will you refuse to keep my commands and my instructions? Bear in mind that Yahweh has given you the Sabbath.”

The Sabbath was a gift to the Israelites from Yahweh their healer so that they might rest and be restored. All they had to do was trust Yahweh and rearrange their habits to allow for a day of rest. But, it was just not in the nature of that stiff-necked people. This pattern of complaining and wishing to go back to Egypt and disobedience grows worse over the years until it gets to the point that Yahweh has to plague them as he did the Egyptians.

In our passage from John, Sabbath and healing come together when Jesus on the Sabbath heals a man born blind. In this act of healing Jesus has proved himself to be the LORD who heals us. He has done something here that only God can do. He’s healed a man born blind and restored him to life. Back then birth defects were superstitiously seen as a curse from God. One popular belief was that the child’s parents had sinned so grievously that God was blatantly cursing their children for all to see. There was also another weird “pop-belief” that the soul of a person before birth could commit a terrible sin for which they could be cursed when finally taking on flesh. Both of these beliefs were unbiblical. Because people with birth defects were believed to be cursed by God,

no one wanted to come into contact with them for fear of the curse rubbing off so they were humiliated, cut-off from functional participation in the community, and forced to beg. With this healing Jesus declared that the man was not cursed and restored him to normal life in his community. He would beg no more.

Jesus tells his disciples that it was not sin, neither his parent’s nor his own, that caused him to be born blind. He was born that way so that the works of God could be revealed in him. Those who took to heart what Jesus had done for him would see that the LORD is our healer, our restorer. Unfortunately, the religious authorities, the ones who in the very least should have seen or realized who Jesus was, that he was at least of God, they could not see it and thus revealed themselves to be blind with respect to the things of God. Even more unfortunate was that they made Sabbath rest, God’s gift of rest to us, the issue which blinded them. For them God’s gift of Sabbath rest was not a gift but rather a requirement. I don’t think that the man was healed was so much the issue. It was more because Jesus had made mud and rubbed it in the man’s eyes and then he went and washed on the Sabbath. If the healing was of God it would not have required them to do work on the Sabbath. So, it could not have been of God. They could not recognize the works of God. They could not see God’s grace in action right before their very eyes because they were blinded by their desire to preserve God’s gift of the Sabbath with rules. To them the Lord was not the one who heals us according to his steadfast love and faithfulness but rather the one who simply is the judge of us.

I think a similar blindness exists in much of the church today. If you read the newspapers with respect to what is reported as happening in the Church, you don’t hear that today a man born blind was healed and restored to true human community because the LORD Jesus Christ is our Healer. What we hear is that Anglican churches are leaving their communion over the issue of homosexuality. We hear that God says abortion is murder. We hear that God wants North America to be Christian only. We hear of denominational heads petitioning the prime minister to do more about poverty. Really, all we hear is that we believe God is simply the xenophobic judge of humanity who desires altruism. By our public behavior no one would know that Jesus is the One who heals us. We are as challenged by God’s grace today as the Pharisees were in Jesus day.

We think that God’s grace is the forgiveness God extends to humanity because of Jesus’ death on the cross provided we believe it and live accordingly. Forgiveness is only the byproduct of God’s grace not the sum total of it. God’s grace is his presence with us, his favour extended to us, and his real acting on our behalf for our good in, through, and as Jesus Christ and this is all really experienced because the Holy Spirit is present with us. God’s grace is that the LORD our Healer is here with us doing his works of healing and causing us to find the Sabbath rest in him through knowing and trusting his love. The challenge of God’s grace to us is simply letting him be gracious to us and heal us so that we relate to one another according to the love of Christ Jesus in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. The temptation that we live with is that we reduce God to being only concerned about how well we manage our sin so that he doesn’t have to judge us. God’s free gift to humanity in Jesus Christ through the

indwelling of the Holy Spirit is human community that actually loves; human community established in relationships where we allow each other to be our broken selves in front of each other so that we can help one another truly grow to maturity in Christ. It would be so nice to turn on the news and hear the reporter say, “Today, I found a group of people so caring that I didn’t have to hide myself behind some façade. They saw me for who I am and still loved me. Today I went to church.” Amen.