

Oil, Mud and Water

A pastor, known for his lengthy sermons, noticed a man get up and leave during the middle of his message. The man returned just before the conclusion of the service. Afterwards the pastor asked the man where he had gone.

"I went to get a haircut," was the reply.

"But," said the pastor, "why didn't you do that before the service?"

"Because," the gentleman said, "I didn't need one then."

Anointing – a liberal pouring of oil on the forehead that flows and shines, reflecting the light and glory of God. This special ritual was reserved for kings – men with powerful sword arms and iron ruling fists. But out in the fields it happened to David – with a little help from Samuel and his father. A young boy who was old enough to tend his family's sheep and fight a Giant was set apart to lead his people and to serve God. Again and again God's Spirit came to David – even when he did a pretty good job of messing things up. David was the king that all Jews knew and venerated. So, to the Pharisees, this was the way anointing was done.

We know anointing – the clean kind of anointing done with water at baptism. It happened to Jesus in the river Jordan. The Spirit of God descended that day. In our own baptisms we shine, too, with the light and glory of God – and the Spirit that continually sweeps into our lives whether we expect it or not. We are called “children of the light”, baptized as we are to follow Jesus and attest to his work and to live in his way.

The gospel shows us another anointing – earthy and messy in more ways than one. No shining oil or clear water for the man born blind but some spit and soil rubbed together and pasted on his face. The aftermath is a man shining with new hope and belief that finally gets him run out of town. We normal folk can handle the fact that the Son of God did the extraordinary with the ordinary. But the Jewish leaders and even the disciples had a hard time with it.

You see, they believed that suffering and illness was a direct consequence of sin – if not the person's directly then the sin of the parent or his family. Jesus then did what we know always gets him in trouble. Jesus boldly spoke out and said, “His suffering is not because of sin, but a place where God's glory is shown.” It was where Jesus' work could clearly be shown. “No way,” mutter the Jewish leaders. “No way is God involved in this messiness.”

As the story progresses we find the man with new vision begins to see more and more – and the Pharisees less and less. Jesus was calling them to “see the light”. But they could not, would not see, in more ways than one. What do we share with the now-seeing man? What do we share with the Pharisees? Do we act in ways that are bound by regulations or in ways inspired by the Spirit?

Scott Hoezee of Calvin Seminary tells this story: It was shortly after World War II when the World Council of Churches decided to check on how its money was being spent in a remote area of the Balkans where the World Council was trying to help needy churches re-build after the war. So it dispatched John McKenzie, who was an officer with the WCC and the president of the Church of Scotland. Accompanying Dr. McKenzie were two other pastors, both of whom came from a fairly conservative, pietistic denomination. One afternoon they paid a

visit to an Orthodox priest in a remote village. The man was clearly thrilled to receive the visit in that he otherwise worked in rather lonely isolation.

Immediately upon seating the guests in his study, the priest produced a box of fine Havana cigars and offered one to each of his three guests. Dr. McKenzie gingerly took one, bit the end off, lit it, and took a few puffs, saying how fine it was. The other two pastors looked horrified. "No thank you! We do not smoke!" they quickly said. Feeling bad that he maybe had offended the two brothers, the priest wanted to make amends and so left the room only to re-appear with a flagon of his finest wine. Dr. McKenzie took a glassful, swirled it, sniffed it like a connoisseur, and then praised its fine quality. Soon he asked for another glass. Meanwhile his traveling companions drew back even more visibly. "No thank you! We do not drink!" they snapped. Well, later when the three returned to their car, the two pastors assailed McKenzie. "Here you are an officer with the World Council and the leader of Scotland's Church and yet you smoke and drink!?" "No, I don't," he barked at them. "But somebody in there had to be a Christian!"

“God cannot have been involved in this incident because it does not conform to our rules and patterns” the Pharisees concluded. “Disagree with us, and you’re a greasy sinner. Period. End of discussion.”

The Pharisees could not see – and sadly this continues to be the case in the world today. It’s found in politics and in religion. No matter what institution or system we name we will always find places where we need to shine the light. Maybe more importantly, we have to look for the light – and much of the time WE will have to BE the light. We need to be the reminders that things don’t always have to “be this way.” Needless suffering – pain or oppression or hunger or prejudice – is healed one person, one moment at a time. No special tools are required – just a little light will guide the way.

The good news is, the Spirit comes to all people – Kings who would be anointed by oil; or a beggar man anointed by spit and mud; or for anyone who comes to Jesus – water is enough.

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