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2011

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Recommended Citation

Lund, Kristine (2011) "Are We Called To Be Right Or Faithful?," *Consensus*: Vol. 33 : Iss. 2 , Article 9.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol33/iss2/9>

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Are We Called To Be Right Or Faithful?

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Text: John 9:1-41

Do you ever want to be right? Have you ever driven in the car with someone and been convinced that you knew the best way to go? Do you ever feel that push inside to win, to be right, or to prove someone else wrong?

Be honest now, I'm sure I can't be the only one who has felt that need, the urge, the desire to be right. It's especially hard when we feel strongly about an issue – whether it's the war in Iraq/Afghanistan, climate change, a concern of local politics, a specific point of theology or any other area where we find ourselves having strong convictions or opinions. It can happen in predictable ways or sometimes we will be surprised by the intensity we feel.

Today's lesson from John's gospel is an invitation to look at that tendency, the desire to be right no matter what the cost. John's Gospel is written to a Jewish community where Jews were in conflict with Jews. This passage in John is unique not only in John but in all the Gospels. It begins with a sign action by Jesus followed by a series of dramatic actions growing out of Jesus' action. Jesus himself appears only at the beginning and at the end. In other words, Jesus heals the man, disappears from the narrative and reappears at the end to receive, confirm and vindicate the blind man, now healed and become a disciple. Most of the action in our passage occurs between Jesus' two arrivals.

Much of this narrative corresponds to the story of the church: Jesus comes with blessing and instruction, Jesus departs, and then Jesus will return with vindication for his church. The church is now living in the time after Jesus' departure, the period between his first and final manifestations. John's Gospel is very sensitive to Jesus' absence and responds in other places in the gospel with instruction and encouragement for the church that is living "in the meantime." The story in today's Gospel lesson reflects that same sensitivity to the life of the church living between "a little while and you will not see me" and "a little while and you will see me." John understands that the time during Jesus' absence is no picnic. Tensions were arising in John's church and today's Gospel lesson is an attempt to speak to these. Looking back over the centuries we might reflect that "it seems to be ever thus."

When we need to be right, we are willing to sacrifice the needs of the other just as the Pharisees were willing to sacrifice the needs of the blind man in order to uphold the rules regarding work on the Sabbath. It is pretty clear in our world, in both small and large ways, how dangerous it is to rigidly hold on to an opinion or belief. Certainly it is easy to identify this tendency in others, in those persons or groups we would identify as fundamentalists, but this need to be right can flourish on both the left and right wing, among Biblicists and among those who serve other ideologies, among liberals and conservatives and whatever way in which we choose to categorize each other. In fact, the need to be right can thrive within any of us.

When we read John's account of the healing of the blind man and the experience of the Pharisees, the blind man, his parents, and neighbours, we can see that Jesus was inviting them to see something different. Jesus' whole ministry was about seeing things differently. Time after time, people were invited to recognize God's work in the world from a different perspective. When the first disciples were called they had to choose to stop following John the Baptist. When Jesus heals the blind man, everyone in the narrative is being asked to choose between Moses and Jesus, between trusting obedience to the law or to trusting Jesus' offer of divine grace.

For us this may not seem like a very significant issue since the choice to us seems obvious. But it is important for us to remember that we read this narrative knowing how the story of Jesus ends. However, if we were to translate this into our own situation then the question becomes: What is it like for us to have our beliefs, our traditional ways of doing things, confronted? Are we open to having our comfortable or familiar ways of thinking about things challenged? If we look at the ministry of Jesus, he was continually asking people to give up one belief in order to believe in something else, or at least to believe something differently.

Jesus asks us to grow in faith too, not just the people in the Biblical stories. We are challenged to think about our faith and to be willing to give up beliefs that no longer are adequate, and to embrace other beliefs that are based on new insights given to us by God through Scripture, through the Sacraments and through our life of faith. Jesus' call is to be faithful, not to be right. Let me say that again: Jesus calls us to be faithful, not to be right. Faithfulness demands that we be open and responsive to the movement of God in our lives.

So now you may be asking, well, can't I be both? Can't I be both right and faithful? I've been pondering this question for awhile now and I have come to the conclusion that I think it is very difficult to hold these two together, if not impossible. Now I am open to further discussion on this point at a later time but let me share with you my thinking on this.

When I need to be right about something then I now take centre stage. I am in the middle and I have pushed the other (whether it's an individual, group, or God) to the side. My need to be right becomes primary because I am convinced of the correctness of my position. I have come to an answer for the question that is being asked and I am no longer open to deliberate it anymore. My answer is fixed. I am not open to being convinced or influenced by anyone's perspective as my goal is to remain right. In my need to be right I might also be willing to hurt the other, to sacrifice the relationship, or at least not care how my need to be right affects the other. Remaining right is what's most important.

If I am faithful in following Jesus then I recognize that I don't know it all, I don't know where God is leading me, I am not in control of the opportunities that every day God will put in front of me. I have to get out of the centre and remain in relationship with God and with those around me as I seek to "see" what God is revealing at any given moment. And, as the blind man discovered, "sight" is not without its challenges. When he could see, John tells us that he didn't know where he was, his community didn't know how to respond to him, his parents were worried that they might be ostracized from the synagogue and their religious community. When the blind man told his story over and over again he didn't even convert anyone – in fact he seems to have made the Pharisees

angry, upset his parents, and confused his neighbours. However, in the telling of his story repeatedly, he seems to learn a lot about his faith through telling his story over and over to the doubting questioners. In the telling, the blind man becomes clear that Jesus has come from God.

So it is for us. At times we will feel disoriented as God invites us to reflect on what we have always believed or always done, as new opportunities arise for relationships with persons of different cultures, backgrounds or belief systems, or as God invites us to venture into new experiences. We will not necessarily feel confident, safe or sure of where God is leading. As it was for the blind man, we may feel disoriented and confused and we will need time to understand and articulate God's actions in our lives.

John tells us that sight and blindness are not defined by one's physical sight but by one's openness to the revelation of God in Jesus. God grant us the courage to recognize when we have become invested in being right, give us the strength to step away from the centre and help us stay in the vulnerability of living "in the between time." May we be open to see like the blind man: God in the midst of our relationships with friends and loved ones, in our community and in our world. Amen.