[As our Adult Forum is unable to meet on Sunday mornings, here is the handout we would have used last Sunday, expanded to include some of my teaching notes (rewritten into logical sentence form), a few other interesting quotes, and questions for reflection. For those who have it, this is meant to supplement, not replace, the Christ is for Us book. – Steve]

1 Samuel 16:1-13
1 The Lord said to Samuel, "How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and set out; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons."
2 Samuel said, "How can I go? If Saul hears of it, he will kill me." And the Lord said, "Take a heifer with you, and say, 'I have come to sacrifice to the Lord.'
3 Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do; and you shall anoint for me the one whom I name to you."
4 Samuel did what the Lord commanded, and came to Bethlehem. The elders of the city came to meet him trembling, and said, "Do you come peaceably?"
5 He said, "Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to the Lord; sanctify yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice." And he sanctified Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.
6 When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, "Surely the Lord's anointed is now before the Lord."
7 But the Lord said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."
8 Then Jesse called Abinadab, and made him pass before Samuel. He said, "Neither has the Lord chosen this one."
9 Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, "Neither has the Lord chosen this one."
10 Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, "The Lord has not chosen any of these."
11 Samuel said to Jesse, "Are all your sons here?" And he said, "There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep." And Samuel said to Jesse, "Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here."
12 He sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The Lord said, "Rise and anoint him; for this is the one."
13 Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward. Samuel then set out and went to Ramah.

The background of this passage is the Israelites’ desire for a king, which God, although considering it a bad idea, reluctantly agreed to, choosing Saul, who was anointed by Samuel (chapters 8-10). By chapter 15, however, God tells Samuel “I regret having made Saul king” due to the latter’s disobedience and tells Samuel to anoint a new king. Samuel is hesitant
to follow God’s will out of fear of Saul, but God reassures Samuel (and suggests a subterfuge to keep word of the anointing from getting back to the king).

The passage concerns the anointing of David, but it is initially about Samuel, the prophet of God who has repeatedly been called a “seer” (9:9, 18-19); yet Samuel’s sight is shown deceiving him in the process of recognizing the new king. He assumes Eliab must be God’s choice because of his appearance and stature, even though he knows the similarly impressive Saul (10:23) did not turn out well. He discovers, however, that God has a different plan and that Samuel’s own expectations have misled him: Samuel must wait for God’s guidance, even to the point of seemingly being without further options (11).

QUESTIONS: When have you been misled by your own expectations? Have there been times when you didn’t see and understand what God was up to? What helps you deal with such situations?

Seven is a perfect number biblically, and yet all seven sons are rejected; it is only then that the eighth son is mentioned as an afterthought. He is a seemingly unimportant person, excluded from initial consideration, and although he is described as handsome in appearance, he apparently lacks the impressive stature of Eliab. His own father Jesse refers to David (who isn’t even named until verse 13) rather dismissively as “the youngest,” as if to suggest he is not worth the effort of presenting. But in the topsy-turvy biblical world, where the first shall be last and the last shall be first, the divine choice turns out to be the unexpected and unanticipated child.

QUESTIONS: Have you experienced times when God used an unexpected or unanticipated person or occurrence to guide your life or reveal divine wisdom to you? Has there been a time when you were that unexpected person in another’s life? (In relation to these questions, look also at Christ is for Us p.65, question 2.)

Ephesians 5:8-14
8 For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light-
9 for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true.
10 Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord.
11 Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them.
12 For it is shameful even to mention what such people do secretly;
13 but everything exposed by the light becomes visible,
14 for everything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says, "Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you."

The Ephesians passage plays on a common biblical contrast of light/day on the one hand and darkness/night on the other. (It is good to keep in mind how deep the darkness of night would have been in biblical times, and how welcome the light of morning might have been!) In that sense a contrast is also stated between shown and hidden, revealed and secret, seeing and unable to see. The concluding verse reminds the reader that the light image is
ultimately about the presence and power of Christ, the one whom John 8:12 portrays calling himself “the light of the world” and assuring his listeners, “Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” Similarly, the phrase that concludes the above passage can be seen not merely in terms of the resurrection but also in the sense of awakening to an enlightened understanding and resulting life in Christ. The great early Cistercian writer William of St. Thierry (c1070s-1148) speaks of his own similar awakening:

Long persistence in bad ways, along with very great insensibility of mind, has hardened me. I have learned to sleep with the sunshine full on my face, and have grown used to it. . . . [But] sometimes indeed I hear your Spirit’s voice, and though it is no more than the whistling of a gentle breeze that passes me, I understand the message: Come unto me and be enlightened. I hear and I am shaken. Arising as from sleep and shaking off my lethargy, a certain wonder fills me. I open my mouth and draw in my breath; I stretch my spiritual muscles and rouse them from their sloth. I turn my back on the shades of night in which my conscience lies and come forth to the Sun of Righteousness who is rising now for me. (Meditations 2.5, 2.6)

As William’s words suggest, the light is not our own; rather (to quote verse 8 above), “in the Lord you are light.” However, living as children of light is proof of its power, leading to fruitful rather than fruitless works: in other words, works that bring forth a harvest of good. The passage explains how to be children of light through three imperatives:

1) “live” (8) in harmony with what is good, right, and true—a commitment to living according to Christ’s light;
2) “find out” (10) what is pleasing to the Lord, suggesting a combination of reflection on scripture, enlightened reason, and openness to the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the wisdom found within the people of God;
3) “take no part” (11) in evil actions, but expose them as evil, suggesting discernment based on the commitment and reflection mentioned above.

The apostle suggests that either light rules or darkness does (11-12; compare to John 3:19, “light has come into the world, but people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil”); the latter involves the “deeds done in secret” (although they will be revealed) which are treated with contempt in verse 12, possibly referencing the popular ancient saying “night knows no shame.” Again, the sleeper awakened from such darkness to the light of Christ is now able to “see better,” recognize deeds for what they are, and choose wisely.

QUESTIONS: What practices and sources help enlighten you to follow Christ and live as a child of the light? What areas of your life need more light (of discernment) shining on them?

John 9:1-41

[This is an incredibly lengthy gospel reading, so we will look at a few highlights!]

1 As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth.
His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.

We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work.

As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world."

When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes,

saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see.

The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?"

Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him." He kept saying, "I am the man."

But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?"

He answered, "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' Then I went and washed and received my sight."

They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know."

In verses 2-3 both Jesus and the disciples make statements including (in Greek as well as English) the word “that”; but the intention couldn’t be more distinct!

- For the disciples it functions as a result clause: “whose sin caused this man to suffer?” with the underlying idea of God retributively and even vindictively punishing people for sins (including those of others). This view is still heard today, as when disasters occur or diseases appear and are attributed by some public figure to “God’s wrath” against some particular group.

- But Jesus uses his “that” phrase in a very different way. It functions as a purpose statement: this happened so that God’s healing power might bless this man in a unique way, revealing divine love and witnessing to Jesus as the Light of the World. (Nor does Jesus’ purpose statement mean God specifically caused the blindness to occur, but rather that its occurrence now provides the opportunity for positive divine action.)

Questions: How do you respond when people say things that portray God in a problematic way? How would you portray God “in a better light” in such situations? How might Jesus’ words “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9) help in such a portrayal?

Notice that the healing (6) is presented as a symbolic embodiment of Jesus’ self-description as “light of the world” (5). Also note that the man is asked to “go wash,” and is not healed until he does so (verse 7). As with the healing of the ten lepers (Lk 17:12-15) or of Naaman (2 Kings 5:1-19), this man is required to act on the faith that something will happen.

Questions: Have you ever been called upon to walk a particular path without knowing the outcome, and to trust in a result that is not yet apparent?
The Gospel reading continues...
[Note that in the following passage the evangelist uses the term “Jews” (18, 22) not to describe the Jewish people as a whole, but the Pharisees (compare verses 16-18).]

13 They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind.
14 Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes.
15 Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, "He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see."
16 Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath." But others said, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" And they were divided.
17 So they said again to the blind man, "What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened." He said, "He is a prophet."
18 The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight
19 and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?"
20 His parents answered, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind;
21 but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself."
22 His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue.
23 Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him."
24 So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, "Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner."
25 He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see."
26 They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?"
27 He answered them, "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?"
28 Then they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses.
29 We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from."
30 The man answered, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes.
31 We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will.
32 Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind.
33 If this man were not from God, he could do nothing."
34 They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" And they drove him out.
35 Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?"
He answered, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him."

Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he."

He said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped him.

Jesus said, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind."

Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, "Surely we are not blind, are we?"

Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains.

The remainder of the gospel is worth considering in relation to the Ephesians passage.

Its overall movement:
1) Verses 1-12 provide the story of a man brought to physical sightedness, then later spiritually enabled to see Jesus for who he is and respond appropriately (35-38).
2) On the other hand, verses 13-34 portray certain Pharisees who ought to have spiritual sight (and thus respond to Jesus appropriately) as lacking it: they are spiritually blind and become more and more obdurate in their blindness. (Note the irony of verse 29: Jesus is the one “from heaven” 3:13; but the group of Pharisees, thinking of his hometown, say they “do not know where he comes from.”) Notice also that the Pharisees’ concern for the sabbath laws (16)—certainly not a negative thing in itself—nevertheless distracts some of them from seeing the value and the significance of what Jesus has done, keeping them in the dark as to his identity.
3) Verses 39-41 provide a summary of the point of this scene, and its contrast of spiritual sight and blindness.

Jesus enlightens the man both physically and spiritually. William Countryman (The Mystical Way in the Fourth Gospel) puts it this way:

The blind man’s gaining of sight is thus a metaphor for his spiritual enlightenment. True sight is to see things as they really are. As long as one is oriented toward the Son [that is, the One who enlightens], one sees; turn toward some other standard of reality, and one is blind. The physical restoration of sight to the blind man is a metaphor for our more significant, interior discovery of sight. (75-76 excerpted)

QUESTION [from Christ is for Us p.66, #4]: In our Gospel text, the man’s spiritual rebirth takes almost all of John 9 as he grows in his understanding of Jesus. Create a personal timeline of your spiritual journey from your first awareness of God to the present. What have you been learning along the way? What do you hope to learn?

Conclude by reading Psalm 23 (the Psalm for this Sunday) prayerfully.