

## **“Spit and Polish”**

**John 9:1-41**

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**The House of Hope Presbyterian Church**

**March 22, 2020**

### **Fourth Sunday in Lent**

Years ago, a friend recommended a work of fiction titled *The Skallagrigg*. It opens in 1927 England; in its first pages, a boy of seven with cerebral palsy named Arthur, is being institutionalized; his clothes and all his possessions are taken from him, and he is brought to a cot in the middle of a large ward of boys with all kinds of mental and physical disabilities. He is left to live in squalor and abuse. I returned the book to its shelf.

I picked it up about five years later and read it all the way through in a weekend, at that point I couldn't put it down; and it came up in conversation with one of you a few weeks ago. It's been on my mind.

Arthur became a non-person when he was sent to the institution. Nothing of the life he'd experienced with his birth family survived those first few hours and even his name was carelessly changed by record keepers as he moved along through the system. He became known as Eddie Baker, in part because one of his friends could not say Arthur, and started to call him Eddie, but also in part, because in 1927, society and institutions of that kind thought disability lowered worth. Something like cerebral palsy was, among other things, thought to be an outward sign that someone sinned. The parents, the grandparents, the child him or herself, someone had to have brought this on.

The reason the story caught for me the second time was a glimpse of the theology of hope embedded in the story that helped me hang on through Arthur's institutional beginnings and make it to Esther. The book is really about Esther, a woman born for just such a time as this, Esther Marquand. We fast forward to the 1960's when Esther is born with cerebral palsy. She has a home until she can no longer be cared for by family and must be placed in an institution.

Esther's life is so far removed from Arthur's in care and nurture that it seems like life on another planet.

Though she lives in a care facility, she visits the homes of her father, her grandparents and eventually other friends; as a teenager she attends a boarding school for persons with disabilities. But she has to work and scheme to find ways to let people know that there is a brain inside her body; Esther is extremely intelligent; though she cannot speak clearly, she eventually gets this message across. And in time, she becomes a computer programmer.

Through Esther's life in institutions, she begins to hear stories about a boy named Arthur; the stories recount the struggles of Arthur and his friends to overcome abuse and neglect through Arthur's faith in a saving presence that he named the Skallagrigg.

The book is brutally honest about loneliness and the human search for love. It is brilliant at revealing the way our wounds and inabilities intertwine with our human wants and needs to twist our spirits. By showing how Esther's spirit, mind and soul are at times captive within her body, sometimes spasming even further out of her control when she became tense or upset, it gives us a bird's eye view of the good and the bad of human

nature. We plan and scheme, we dream and imagine, we have our opinions, routines and habits – and then a pandemic comes along – and our brokenness and wounds don't have the safety and stability they need. We've already seen the best and the worst reactions to the virus. Thank heavens, it's just the kind of time we can expect Jesus to walk by.

Jesus walked into the life of a blind man sitting and begging by the side of the road. He gave him his sight. There is no mistaking the messages throughout the gospels about the blessedness of being able to see.

In the French language, to see is *voir*, to know is *savior*; seeing and knowing are linked. We have to learn how to get this right. The disciples see someone who is blind and they think they know they are in the presence of sin. Jesus, who can see and know how every one of us wears our sin, sees a **person** who needs to be healed of a physical ailment.

And if you were able to stay with the entire forty-one verses of this story, you know it doesn't end there. The inquiry goes on and on; it was so ingrained in the minds of the ancient peoples that physical disease meant sin that they couldn't let it go. But God, thinks differently – God has an irrational preference for the poor, ailing, and dis-spirited. For God, our differences are a part of a great and beautiful diversity; for God illness and disability are a call for compassion and a training ground for caring. And most importantly, for God there are no throw away souls.

One day, Esther is taken for a walk by her friend Tom. Tom and Esther have been friends since childhood; he has Down's syndrome. He's grown to be a big, stocky teen, she makes plans for them, he is the physical power. In the park, Esther asks him to leave her sitting under a large tree while sending him off to explore. She wanted some time to think about all the Skallagrigg stories she's collected. One minute gentle rain begins to fall and she is enjoying the cool, wet sensation on her skin and the next, the rain picks up and her wheelchair slides down into a rut and overturns. As she is lying helplessly in the mud and rain, she realizes that Arthur is real and more importantly, she realizes that the Skallagrigg is real. Rolling around in the mud, vulnerable and powerless, Esther realizes through collected stories that love and redemption and hope are real and she decides that it is her life's mission to find Arthur.

Most of us go through life thinking we're going to be ok because we can pick ourselves up when we fall. While Esther is in the mud, she can't get up and that's when she knows – body, mind, and soul that there is help – there is salvation. There is much we could say about the situation in the world, about earthquakes, war and plague and how it feels like the end times; but what it means is, this is a time of revelation – of an opening of the eyes – God teaching us a new thing.

Esther's search is tedious and practically hopeless but with the help of friends, Esther perseveres toward her goal. Of course, I cannot retell the whole story nor would I want to because I encourage any and all to read *The Skallagrigg* for yourselves, but, she does find him. And Arthur is reunited with a member of his family; that family member arranges a special night for Arthur and his friends. They are all taken to King's College Chapel where an entire orchestra and choir are waiting to perform for them and them alone. The description of the music and more importantly, their response to the music is the way I understand Jesus' healing touch and his redemptive presence.

In Arthur's words, "That music was like nothing ever before nor ever will be again. There was quiet and there was loud; there was trumpets to begin and trumpets in the middle; there was a hundred voices and there was one voice; there was deep and there was high. Some [the conductor explained] and some he didn't. Some was new for Arthur and some he [already] knew. And Arthur knew that the Skallagrigg was saying with the help of his friends that the long years were over now and that the bad time was gone" (628).

The cycles of fear and helplessness, frustration, and loss will be with us for a while – but I discovered this week that staying in this story kept me from spinning out – most of the time; it gave me a place to grab hold and get grounded again when the spin took over. On the whole, it kept me more proactive than reactive. God’s story holds every promise for good in life and in death. There is no bigger story in which to put our lives.

We, unlike Esther lying in the mud, we’ve got the spit and polish to clean up and take care of things ... until a virus makes us helpless. The spiritual journey is more like Esther’s; she has to call out for help and so do we. The blind man is not a legal case study on generational sin but a mirror that reflects our need for the presence of this One, this Christ.

The practice of this faith is an invitation to consent. It is by common consent that your life is one of the stories God is using to tell God’s story. Not because it’s perfect but because we keep working at faith, compassion, and peace.

So, here is a suggestion for these days: pick a healing story from the gospels – I think longhand is best ... and put it in your pocket every day. Think about it at work and at dinner. Take it out and read it when you’re worried or afraid. Take it for a walk. Stick with God’s story. And in the coming days, when you meet someone who is afraid, or at a loss, and you know they need something – tell them your healing story. And by that, I mean, tell them how you personally know there is a loving God who holds you dear, will heal you, will not let you go. Maybe it will be what’s written in your pocket, but most likely it will be about a moment at a concert, or worship, at the cabin, with children or grandchildren ... when you knew the love of Christ was real. And in so doing, in this time of coronavirus or any other adversity, we shall come through stronger and more united, and with great love. Amen.