

**“Explain That!”**  
**John 9:1-41**  
**March 26, 2017**  
**The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Jennings**

Sometimes I feel like a large portion of my job is explaining things. One of the saints of this church for many years was Jack Gray. Jack served the church for many years as an elder, he was the Village president, and he was the scoutmaster of the troop that called this church home and still does. He gave so much to the people around him. But Jack was also sort of a gruff kind of guy. At first meeting, Jack could be intimidating, he certainly was to me. But beneath his crusty exterior was a man who longed to serve God and God's people, who loved his church, his family and his Lord, and a man who wanted to understand. In his retirement years, Jack was a faithful part of our Thursday Morning Bible Study. During that study we regularly discuss many of the great issues of the Christian faith, while still relating them to our everyday lives. We discuss, but we don't always come up with answers. And that would frustrate Jack. He wanted answers, he wanted explanations. Perhaps we were discussing the mystery of the Trinity, or of discovering God's will, or the logical conundrum of predestination, or the problems of evil in the world and how a loving God can allow them to occur. And sometime in the discussion, Jack would turn his gaze to me and say, “Now you spent three years at that fancy seminary on the East Coast with all those learned professors and all those books in that huge library. Surely, surely sometime there you must have picked up some wisdom and have come up with an explanation to this problem. Why don't you share it with us?” And more times than not, I couldn't. I had no explanation. And I think that for many faith itself is not like that. It is beyond explanation.

The man born blind is asked for an explanation in today's story. An amazing thing has happened. A man who has been blind since birth has received his sight. How did it happen? Who did it to him? How did it work? Explain it, they ask him. They don't understand how this could happen. It certainly couldn't have been the work of God because whatever this man did, he did it on the Sabbath, and they know that God wouldn't have allowed a miracle to happen on the Sabbath. Maybe he is a worker of

evil. Or maybe it never really happened. That's the explanation, this guy has just been fooling everyone, he wasn't really born blind. So they bring in his parents and they affirm that yes, he has been blind from birth. Then what's the explanation? We don't have one, they say. I don't have an explanation, once I was blind and now I see.

Faith is like that. It often has no explanation. Once in your life you did not believe, then you did. Can you explain what happened? No, not really. Yesterday we had our church's confirmation retreat. In that retreat we talked to the youth about what we believe as Presbyterians, as Christians, and as individuals. This is what I believe. But do we have an explanation of why we believe? Maybe not. Maybe like the man born blind we know only that there was a time we didn't believe, but now we do. Do you remember a time when you didn't believe? And perhaps now you do? How did that happen? What occurred to make you believe? I remember a time when I didn't believe. I sort of remember coming to faith, but how did that happen? Was there something that made me believe? I can tell you what was going on in my life at that time, I can tell you some of the things that were happening and what I was thinking about them, but I don't know if I can tell you what made me believe. Did I choose to believe in God? Or did it just dawn on me that I did? I'm not really sure. Explain that. I can't. Neither can the man born blind. Notice that he cannot describe his conversion moment to anyone's satisfaction, but he can tell the difference it makes. "All I know," he says, "is that I was blind and now I see." And maybe that's better than an explanation anyway. Maybe instead of explaining how we got faith we should describe what difference it has made in our lives. I used to be afraid, and now I'm not so much anymore. I used to wonder what my purpose was in life and I felt I was just wandering, but now I know I can live to love God and all that God loves. I was overcome with despair when someone I loved died, but my faith gave me a strength from beyond myself. When I look at the world around us, it is my faith that gives me hope. When I was in the hospital, I prayed and I found that I trusted that I was in God's hands no matter what happened.

These are the stories we need to hear and to tell. Do I care how you came to believe? Yes, that's

interesting to me, but I care a lot more about what belief has done in your life. What difference does your trust in God make? Once I saw the world like this, but now I see it this way. Once I believed this, but now I believe this and this is what that looks like in my life. Once I lived in a place where I was blind to certain things, but now my eyes are open and I see things this way instead. Christians find enough stuff to argue about, and for too often we've argued about how faith comes to a person. And it's been argued that this story is behind all of that. It has been said that this story is the beginning of Christian denominations. Several people met up in Jerusalem after the resurrection of Jesus and discovered that they all had been healed by Jesus of their blindness. After an initial rejoicing together one of them commented that Jesus had healed him by touch his eyes. Another said that Jesus had healed him without touching him at all. Another said that Jesus had spit on his fingers and touched his eyes and so healed him. One more said that Jesus had spit and made mud with dirt and put it on his eyes and so was healed. None of them could agree about which was the way it should be done and so they split into groups of touchers and non-touchers, spitters and non-spitters, and muddy Christians and non-mudders. We focus so much on how God touched us and therefore how we think he should touch everyone else that we forget that the miracle is not the point—the point is transformation. The point is the life we live after. To paraphrase Rabbi Harold Kushner, “The ultimate goal is to be transformed into the people God had in mind when he created us and to transform the world into the kind of world God had in mind when he created it.”

That's what I want to know. I don't want you to explain how you got faith. I want to know what difference it makes in you life.