

13 March 2016

## Effective Engagement . . . or Bureaucracy

John 9:18-38

Today we complete the story we began last week, the healing of the man born blind. Last week we saw how the Pharisees were more focused on violations of sabbath rules than about the fact that a man had been given sight. We continue in John 9, verses 18-38:

*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 and asked them, 'Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?' His parents answered, 'We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; 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.' 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. Therefore his parents said, 'He is of age; ask him.'*

*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.' He answered, 'I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.' They said to him, 'What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?' 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?' Then they reviled him, saying, 'You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.' The man answered, 'Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.' They answered him, 'You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?' And they drove him out.*

*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 worshipped him.*

Last week, we saw that when confronted with a man in need, Jesus didn't care whether the man was a sinner. He reached out, touched the man's blind eyes, and healed him. But Jesus couldn't do anything for the blindness of the Pharisees, who were so focused on discerning sin that they were blind to human need. A man's life was changed, and all the Pharisees saw was someone who had broken the rules.

So what do you do when someone you don't like appears to have broken rules? You call for an official investigation, right? So they do. The priests and religious leaders subpoena the formerly-blind man's parents and grill them on whether the man had *really* been blind. What if this was an elaborate hoax cooked up by Jesus? Then they'd have him! No luck, though. He really was blind. So they call the man himself back for a second interrogation, this time helpfully telling him which testimony will be in his best interest. "We already know that the man who

healed you is a sinner, so just sign this statement agreeing to that, and you can go.” But the man won’t do it: *I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.* The priests step up their questioning. Look, we are Moses’ disciples – Moses, to whom God delivered the Law. That makes us the authorities on God, but this man is not one of us. He’s a lone wolf, operating without authorization.” But the healed man simply replies, “Isn’t that funny? You claim to speak for God, but when this man does something that can only be the power of God, you don’t know where he comes from.” Furious, the priests call the man a sinner and kick him out.

Sound at all familiar? It is the eternal story of something fresh, new, and promising hitting the institutional walls of official bureaucracy. These priests were the curators of God’s revelation. They had established protocols for what the work of God looked like and where and in what circumstances it was permitted to appear. They weren’t opposed to healings, if only Jesus had gone through the appropriate channels! He could have made application to the priests to perform a healing, which could have been considered by the Council at their next meeting, scheduled for a day that was *not* the sabbath, and then performed with appropriate supervision from the Subcommittee on Healings and Acts of Mercy. It wouldn’t have taken more than a couple of weeks, provided everything was submitted on time with the correct signatures.

A few years ago, Gordon McKenzie wrote a book on surviving bureaucracy, called *Orbiting the Giant Hairball*. McKenzie points out that everything in a bureaucracy was put there for a reason, to protect the institution from harm. Every new problem that an institution encounters results in a new rule, designed to prevent *that* from ever happening again, which is added to all the other rules, like a new strand around the outside of a large hairball. Nothing is ever removed, and as it grows larger the hairball no longer moves either. It no longer has an external purpose but exists simply to maintain itself by protecting itself from threats. Change is a threat. That self-protective wad of rules is what we call bureaucracy, and it happens in church.

Cora, a woman in her 50s, who had been active in her church in many different ministries, encountered the hairball. Cora writes,

It was fine as long as I was doing what I was told. As long as I was plugged into what someone else had put forth, it was no problem. But when I wanted to do something on my own, it was a different story. The last thing I tried to do was start a little group to help the elderly people in our congregation, where we would just go and mow lawns and wash windows and things for people who needed it . . . I talked to the missions minister, and he told me to come up with a name for my group, propose a budget, write a mission statement, come to the board hearing, and figure out a way to report back every month. I told him, “Really? I just want to mow lawns. Why do we have to do all that?” He told me the board didn’t like things going on in the church unless they could oversee them. (p. 66)

Cora dropped the request and began mowing lawns on her own without telling the board. And eventually, she left the church. Katie’s story is similar. Katie was an artist and licensed therapist who noticed that the run-down, mixed neighborhood where her church was located had children all over the streets after school. She came up with an idea for an art-based after-school community program for the children and took it to her church. First, they told her that they had

no resources to spare, so she modified her request, asking only for space. But there was a problem. The changing neighborhood had become largely Muslim, and the board couldn't see how hosting this program would bring in any new members. Seeing no way it would benefit the institution, they denied the request. Katie found a different location. "Her organization now employs half a dozen people, serves dozens of youth every week, and has won numerous awards for civic engagement" (p. 59). And Katie is no longer at that church.

This chapter in the book *Church Refugees* was the hardest for me to read. Over and over I read the stories of people whose dream to make a difference had been turned aside or stomped on by the bureaucracy of the church. And so they left – not in anger, but in disappointment, and convinced that the church as an institution was simply broken and couldn't be fixed. Now, I'm not that pessimistic. We live in a time when people are extraordinarily suspicious of all institutions, and that extreme attitude comes out in the interviews in this study. But neither can we just dismiss these people's experience of church bureaucracy, least of all us Methodists. We take to bureaucracy like buzzards to roadkill, and we always have. In his list of the "Means of Grace" – alongside prayer and fasting and frequent Communion – John Wesley included "Holy Conferencing." Yes, we are the only denomination that talks with a straight face about the spiritual discipline of going to meetings. And we do go to meetings, even meetings that produce nothing but more meetings. At the 2012 quadrennial General Conference – that's our largest meeting – a huge plan was presented to United Methodists for the purpose of streamlining our bureaucracy. At first it was ruled out of order on a technicality, but teams worked all night to resolve that problem and got it back to the meeting the next day, where it was approved, only to be overturned by the Judicial Council a month later on a different technicality. Our denominational bureaucracy has taken on a life of it's own, like Hal, the computer in *2001: Space Odyssey*,

"What are you doing, Dave?"

"I'm streamlining your bureaucracy!"

"I'm afraid I can't let you do that, Dave."

We have this book, the *Book of Discipline*, which serves as a sort of auxiliary Methodist Bible, which tells us how our committees are supposed to be structured at every level. In the local congregation, it mandates and circumscribes our committees to the nth degree. And here's where it stops being funny: when I thought about our own church refugees – the people who were once very active who have left church – the first three I thought of all disappeared immediately after wrapping up a term as chair of one of those administrative committees. Yes, we got bureaucracy, and it's hurting us.

But what can we do? First of all, we can learn to separate between the institution and the dysfunction that is self-protective bureaucracy. We need to resist bureaucracy, but we *need* institutions. When the early church had a problem fairly administrating their community meal, they appointed administrators, called Deacons. If you dump the institution, scrap all administration, get rid of all the physical assets that require maintenance, you can have a great living room Bible Study, but you can't do the ministries that we do here. So let us stop whining about institutions; let us instead make our institutions functional. We do that, above all, by remembering that our goal as a church is not to survive but to serve. All the resources that we

have – staff, property, other assets – exist to make that service possible. Example: we are replacing our parking lot this year. It's expensive, and we'd love to spend that money on mission projects. But when your parking lot begins to sink, then you eventually have to decide either to replace it or not have one. And without a parking lot, we don't have a Downtown Memory Café or the other ministries that we sponsor here. Yes, the church is an institution, but done right, it is an institution that exists for the sake of others. If we keep that in mind, we'll be okay.

Final word: One more way to deal with bureaucracy. When the bureaucracy encroaches, as it will, laugh at it. Last year I get a letter from the conference telling me that I had to rewrite my annual report on the church. You see, I had organized that report around our own Four Core Purposes, which is how we organize our ministry. But that was not the approved outline, so I wrote another, nearly meaningless report for them. And all you can do is laugh. When the news arrives in September from this year's General Conference, laugh. Laugh, and then go serve someone in need. And then let us know how can we, your church, can help.

Citations from Packard, Josh. *Church Refugees*. Loveland, CO: Group, 2015.