

“The Man Born Blind, Part 2: The Path of Discipleship”

John 9

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Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service

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We return a second time this morning to John chapter nine.

Augustine, in his sermon on this chapter began by telling his congregation “were we to attempt handling the whole of it, and considering, according to our ability, each passage in a way proportionate to its worth, the day would be insufficient.” [Augustine, *Tractate XLIV*,1] That made me feel a bit better about taking up an extra sermon on the text. That said, I will limit myself – as Augustine did – and after this Lord’s Day we will move on to chapter ten.

Last Sunday, as we looked at this text, we considered our drive to be made new, and the fundamental fact that Christ is our Creator and so Christ is the only one who can recreate us as we were meant to be.

This morning we will look at the path of discipleship by which Christ carries out that work of recreation, which is laid out in words and signs throughout this chapter.

With that in mind we turn now to John chapter nine.

Please do listen carefully, for this is God’s word for us this morning.

^{9:1} As he [that is, Jesus,] passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. ² And his disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” ³ Jesus answered, “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him. ⁴ We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work. ⁵ As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” ⁶ Having said these things, he spit on the ground and made mud with the saliva. Then he anointed the man's eyes with the mud ⁷ and said to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). So he went and washed and came back seeing.

⁸ The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar were saying, “Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?” ⁹ Some said, “It is he.” Others said, “No, but he is like him.” He kept saying, “I am the man.” ¹⁰ So they said to him, “Then how were your eyes opened?” ¹¹ He answered, “The man called Jesus made mud and anointed my eyes and said to me, ‘Go to Siloam and wash.’ So I went and washed and received my sight.” ¹² They said to him, “Where is he?” He said, “I do not know.”

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 So the Pharisees again asked him how he had received his sight. And he said to them, “He put mud on my eyes, and I washed, and I see.” ¹⁶ Some of the Pharisees said, “This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath.” But others said, “How can a man who is a sinner do such signs?” And there was a division among them. ¹⁷ So they said again to the blind man, “What do you say about him, since he has opened your eyes?” 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 how he now sees we do not know, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.” ²² (His parents said these

things because they feared the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone should confess Jesus to be Christ, he was to 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 said to him, “Give glory to God. We know that this man is a sinner.”²⁵ He answered, “Whether he is a sinner I do not know. 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 And 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, “Why, this is an amazing 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 if anyone is a worshiper of God and does his will, God listens to him.³² Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a man born blind.³³ If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.”³⁴ They answered him, “You were born in utter sin, and would you teach us?” And they cast him out.

³⁵ Jesus heard that they had cast him out, and having found him he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?”³⁶ He answered, “And who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?”³⁷ Jesus said to him, “You have seen him, and it is he who is speaking to you.”³⁸ He said, “Lord, I believe,” and he worshiped him.³⁹ Jesus said, “For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind.”⁴⁰ Some of the Pharisees near him heard these things, and said to him, “Are we also blind?”⁴¹ Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would have no guilt; but now that you say, ‘We see,’ your guilt remains.

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Lord, like the psalmist,
When we think of the direction you give us through your ancient word,
we take comfort, Lord.
Let your word be now our joy and delight,
as we attend to it here in your house,
so that we would remember your revelation as we go from here, day and night,
that we may cling to and follow it.
Give us that great blessing,
of walking in your ways, by the power of your Spirit
Grant this, we ask, in Jesus’s name. Amen
[Based on Psalm 119:52, 54-56]

We have in our chapter this morning another of John’s signs of Jesus. And as we approach it, it’s important that we remember how John presents the works that Jesus does. John is selective in which stories he tells, and he is precise in how he tells them, and each one is presented as a sign – as something that points beyond itself to deeper spiritual truths about who Jesus is and how we relate to him. And that is especially true of our passage this morning. [Carson, 363; Augustine, XLIV.1]

In the events that unfold in the life of this man born blind, and in how Jesus interacts with him, we are given a picture of the path of – of the pattern of – being a disciple of Jesus.

And four aspects of that path are especially drawn out. What we see is that disciples of Jesus Christ are: enlightened by Jesus Christ, they identify with Jesus Christ, they are witnesses for Jesus Christ, and they worship Jesus Christ.

Let me say that again:

- They are enlightened by Jesus Christ.
- They identify with Jesus Christ.
- They are witnesses for Jesus Christ.
- And they worship Jesus Christ.

This morning we will consider how those four themes emerge in our text, and what they mean for us.

So: first, disciples of Jesus Christ are enlightened by Jesus Christ.

And we see that in the miracle itself, recorded in the first seven verses.

Last Lord's Day we considered the aspects of creation and recreation that come up here, but this morning we need to note that the key way that that recreation plays out in this passage is in enlightenment – in illumination: the man born blind is given the ability to see, and with that, the ability to know and understand – first physically and then spiritually.

As Augustine points out, the blind man's physical condition is parallel to all of humanity's spiritual condition: for we too are blind from birth. [Augustine, XLIV.1] Humanity has rebelled against God, and as such, we have become spiritually blind as a human race. Every one of us, as a result, is born spiritually blind. We begin, like this man.

And our hope is to be given our sight – to be enlightened by the work of Jesus Christ. He is the light of the world, as he tells us here, and if we are to see, he must be the one who illuminates us.

And, of course, that is what we see him do here. And the actions by which he does that for this man born blind point us to the actions he takes in all of his people.

First, as we said last Lord's Day, Jesus in some way makes the man new. Pointing back to the dust with which he made the first man, Jesus applies mud to heal the man's eyes, reminding us that God makes new – God regenerates – those he heals.

Along with that, Jesus anoints the man in verse six, just as he does with all whom he saves – he anoints them with his Spirit, which we read in John's first epistle, is what brings his people to the knowledge and understanding of the truth. [1 John 2:20,27]

Finally, we should note the washing of verse seven. The man washes and then is given his sight. And it should come as no surprise that many in the early church, such as Augustine and Ambrose, saw this washing as a typological reference to baptism. [Augustine, XLIV.2; Ambrose, *Letter* 67.5, Quoted in Leithart, 179]

Church fathers such as Justin Martyr spoke of baptism as an illumination or enlightenment, in which the baptized were given spiritual understanding. [Justin, *The First Apology* LXI] And the

combination of those same themes here would seem to point us to God's work in a Christian in and around their baptism.

And so, the man born blind, like the disciple of Christ, is made new by Jesus, is anointed by Jesus, and is washed at Jesus's command, all of which, working together by God's grace, grants him spiritual understanding and illumination in the gospel, by the work of Christ.

The first movement on the path of discipleship is that the disciple of Jesus Christ is enlightened by Jesus Christ.

The second theme of the path of discipleship is that the disciple of Jesus Christ identifies with Jesus Christ. And we see this in several ways in this chapter.

The first level of that identification with Christ comes in the confession that the man makes that he is Christ's disciple. And we see that clearly, even if indirectly, in verse twenty-seven – the man asks the Pharisees “Do you also want to become his disciples?” And with that “also” he confesses himself already to be a disciple of Jesus. [Augustine, XLIV.11] But the connections and identifications actually go much deeper than that.

And the way that John draws our attention to those other connections is by the words he chooses to use. John is very intentional with his words. And often he uses them to draw our attention to connections he wants us to make. And he signals this especially when he uses a word or phrase that wasn't really necessary – maybe that wasn't even the most natural word choice – but which, when used, evokes something else that has already happened or been said.

The first example of this that we should note in this chapter is the use of the word “anoint” in verse six – there we read: “Having said these things, [Jesus] spit on the ground and made mud with the saliva. Then he anointed the man's eyes with the mud.”

Now, John had a lot of words he could have used to describe Jesus applying the mud to the man's eyes. And so it is striking that he chose the Greek word *epichrisen*, which contains the verb *chrío*, which means “anoint” and is related to the word *christos* from which we get the title “Christ.” We need to remember, the terms “Christ” in Greek means “Anointed One.” And so, with his unusual word choice, John points out to us that “The blind man comes to see after being anointed with mud by the Anointed One.” [Leithart, 106] Or, we could say, the man is “christified” by the “Christ.”

By this, John links together the identity of the Christian with Christ – of the anointed one with *the* Anointed One.

This is the first way that John shows by his choice of words how the disciple of Christ identifies with Christ.

The second is seen in verse nine. And this one can get a bit lost in translation.

If you remember, John chapter eight ended with a crowd ready to stone Jesus. And the reason they were ready to stone him was because of two words he spoke in verse fifty-eight of that chapter: “I am.” “*Ego eimi*” in the Greek. As we said a couple weeks ago, with those words Jesus was identifying himself as God – the great “I Am.” And everyone there knew that's what he was doing – that's why they picked up stones. And so, for us readers, “*ego eimi*” carries a bit of baggage.

And so it can't be a mistake that just ten verses later the phrase shows up again. Only now, it's not in the mouth of Jesus ... it's in the mouth of the man Jesus just healed. [Leithart, 127] In verse nine of our text, we read that the man responded to their questions by saying "I am the man." – but the Greek there is just two words: "I am" – "*Ego eimi*"

In the context of the conversation it's a perfectly valid response, but in the context of the Gospel account, John is clearly pointing us back to the self-identification of Jesus. But why? What does it mean?

Well, we need to remember that it is a common theme throughout the Hebrew Scriptures that the people of God bear God's name. God's name is placed upon them - they bear his name before the nations, they are commanded not to bear his name in vain, his name is placed upon them afresh in the Aaronic benediction. And John seems to be alluding to the same concept here.

The man born blind is not the Great "I Am," but he bears the name of the Great "I Am." He identifies with Jesus – the One who healed him, who anointed him, and whose disciple he is.

And then third, along with that, we should note the use of the word "sent" in verse seven.

As we read this chapter, it seems that John wants us to find some significance in the name of the pool. He gives us an etymology of the name, but he doesn't typically do this with other names or places. Yet in this case he wants us to note that the name of the pool – Siloam – means "sent." But why? [Leithart, 100-101]

Well, the key begins in verse four, where Jesus identifies himself as the one who is "*sent*" by the Father. And it becomes even more clear when we realize that after his washing, the formerly blind man is effectively *sent* to those around him to tell them about what has happened. As one writer puts it: "The blind man is being healed by the Sent One in the pool of sending, and thereby becomes sent." [Leithart, 102]

And so as Jesus was sent, so this man was sent, through a washing of sending.

The man born blind is identified as Jesus's disciple, he shares in the anointing of the Anointed One, he is in some way the representative presence of the great I Am, and he is sent by the One who was sent by the Father.

In all these ways we are reminded that Jesus does not merely seek to heal a people – he seeks to be united with a people, a people who identify with him as he identifies with them – a people who will be his Body, a people who will be his Bride. That is what the Church is called to be – a people united with Christ their Lord.

The question is: Is that what you want as well? Because that is what discipleship is – it is to be united to Christ in such a way that your relationship to him becomes the core of your identity: as a Christian you take his name upon you as your primary family name; you seek your status not in your works or worldly standing but in the fact that you have been anointed by the Anointed One; you see your primary vocation as going where he sends you, to do the work that he desires you to do – for his kingdom, not yours. *That* is what it means to identify with Christ.

And if that's not what you want, if that's not what your heart desires ... then why is that? Because the gospel tells you that the Maker of heaven and earth wants to share his name and his

anointing and his mission with you, as his disciple ... and if that is true, then what *on earth* could be more important or valuable than that?

The second thing we see is that the disciple of Jesus Christ identifies with Jesus Christ.

And it is the last aspect of that identification – the aspect of sending: of call or vocation – that leads us to the next theme of discipleship.

Which is that a disciple is a witness for Jesus Christ. A disciple is sent out, to be a witness for the One who healed them and the One they now identify with. And that is what we see in the man born blind.

When it comes to sending, we tend to turn our minds to foreign missions and vocational callings. But if we do, the man born blind points us right back to ourselves, and directs our attention right back to the places where we live our lives. Because when it comes to bearing witness, this man already has his hands full with those who are around him.

And as he interacts with those around him, we see how quickly the man born blind is himself taken up in the mission and the work of Christ.

And if we've been paying attention, then that should not really surprise us. Because at the beginning of verse four Jesus did not say that *he* needed to be doing the works of God the Father who sent him – he didn't say "*I* must work the works of him who sent me", he said "*We* must work the works of him who sent me." [Leithart, 127]

Which should confuse us a bit, and lead us to ask how *we* are supposed to do the works of the Father who sent Jesus. But then, in the pattern of the man born blind, Jesus gives us an answer.

Because after the healing, Jesus disappears. And then it's not Jesus who is testifying to the people about who Jesus is or what he has done – it is this man born blind.

The man born blind begins to bear witness about who Christ is and what Christ has done for him. He does it both by simply displaying for them what Jesus has done – by seeing among them where once he was blind – and also by speaking to who Jesus must be.

And we are called to do the same thing: We are called to be witnesses for Jesus through both our words and our deeds.

It means that we live the renewed lives that Jesus has enabled us to live, that we let others see, and that we are ready and eager to explain to others who it is that has made our lives the way they are. We are to preach by our words and by our deeds.

But often we fail to do this. Often, we hide the work that Jesus has done in us – we hide the insights he has given us – we hide the virtues he has cultivated in us. We deny the power of Jesus in our lives as we disguise his work in our lives before others, and avoid loving others as he has loved us, for fear of how they might respond. And even if an opportunity does arise to speak of the one who has given us sight, we usually back away from it.

It would be absurd, if after verse seven the man born blind went back among his neighbors and *pretended* to still be blind ... and yet, that is, in many ways, what many of us do in the world.

But the man in our text does not. And as he openly displays and explains the work that Jesus has done in his life, people respond.

Some, like his neighbors in verses eight through twelve, are perplexed. They seem curious and confused. They ask a lot of questions. [Leithart, 61]

Others, like the Pharisees, are more openly hostile.

In the Pharisees we see those who are antagonistic to the witness of the blind man about Jesus. They are suspicious. They are hostile. They have already made their minds up against Jesus. And so they are ready to find fault in what the man has to say.

And then, still others, respond by distancing themselves from the newly healed disciple of Christ. We see this in the man's own parents. And it's worth stopping to note that in some ways, their response may have been the most painful for the man born blind – similar responses certainly can be for us. While the hostility of some brings its own challenges, it can also draw out our courage. But when those we know and love distance themselves from us because of our allegiance to Christ ... that can be especially painful. This man born blind has been healed and we would assume that he wants to celebrate with his family. But, concerned with how this new change could affect them, they hold him at arm's length. And as we live out our faith, we can often expect the same thing. Concerned for what it might mean for their other relationships, or their standing in the world, those we know and love may distance themselves from us and from what Jesus has done for us, out of a desire to protect their place in this world.

By presenting all these pictures to us, our text not only calls us to be witnesses of Jesus, but it "gives us some idea of what it feels like to be a bold witness for Jesus." [Leithart, 62]

As we follow the man born blind, we feel the excitement he must have felt as his neighbors asked questions. As we watch with him the interrogation of his parents, we feel the sadness he must have felt as they backed away from what had happened to him.

And as we see the man's interactions with the Pharisees escalate from verse thirteen to verse thirty-four, we also feel his exasperation at trying to convince the Pharisees of something that should have been self-evident to them, only to receive back from them cruelty and blindness, as their hostility expands from being towards Jesus to also being towards the man born blind himself. [Leithart, 62, 164]

The more they interact, the more hostile the Pharisees become. And there's a lesson in that.

Because the man born blind came with an incredible apologetical argument. He had been born blind. He has neighbors and his parents to testify that that was the case. And now he could see because Jesus healed him. It's hard to get a better apologetical argument than that. Take all the evangelistic courses you want, read all the books there are, and still, you're not going to top that.

But despite all that, the result of his witness was hostility, rejection, and ultimately persecution.

Which reminds us that while we must present the gospel winsomely, while we must put effort into how we speak God's truth, even our best efforts may result in hostility. And that can say more about the hearts of those we speak to than it says about the quality of our efforts. That's certainly the case here.

As he witnessed to them, the people around him pulled farther away from Christ.

But along with that, we should note that the man himself did not.

Just as we pointed out last Lord's Day, as the story goes on, the man's faith actually grows. As one commentator points out: As "the severity of the Pharisees' accusations increases, [...] so does the blind man's boldness" [Leithart, 62] In fact, "It is the Pharisees [...] who push him along in his commitment to Jesus." [Leithart, 141-142]

Standing up and witnessing about Jesus, even in the face of hostility, *strengthens* the faith of the man born blind over the course of this passage.

And the same can often be true of us – of all of us. We must not take on what is foolish, of course. But at the same time, to avoid all situations where we may have our faith challenged may not be healthy for us or for our children either.

Remember, in most areas of life, we grow stronger by pushing against resistance. That is how our muscles grow. It is how we often acquire new skills and abilities. And in our text this morning we see that it is through pushing against resistance that this man's faith grows. He pushes back against the resistance of the Pharisees while Jesus is nowhere to be seen.

And that, in many ways is our calling as well. Jesus tells us, as he commissions us to be his witnesses, that he will be with us always, to the very end of the age. But he is not *physically* present. We cannot see him. And so we find ourselves in a situation not unlike that of the man born blind. And yet, this chapter shows us that it is in that very situation that Christ may be at work to grow our faith. [Leithart, 165]

But then, while this man's faith grows, his place in the world seems to shrink. In verse thirty-four we see that he is cast out of the synagogue. Which brings us back to maybe question Jesus's apparent absence in the man's time of need.

We might wonder – where was Jesus as all of this happened? Why wasn't he there by the side of the man born blind, to defend him and vindicate him and keep him from being removed from the synagogue? [Leithart, 62]

But then the answer comes back. If Jesus wasn't in the synagogue, then why would the man born blind have wanted to stay there? As one author notes: "The narrative makes it clear that as long as the blind man remains in the synagogue, he is not with Jesus. As soon as he steps across the threshold, he finds his Lord. *Who would want to be in a synagogue that does not have Jesus in it?*" [Leithart, 63 (emphasis added)]

And that question has implications for us as well.

We are often so frightened to be cast out of places of opportunity and prestige in this world.

Now, on one level, of course such exclusions are unjust. And it is right and appropriate for God's people to work for justice and to oppose such actions.

But if we reflect on our text this morning, it points us to other even more important truths.

First, when Christians are driven out of a place or an institution, or a social circle, what should bother us even more than the opportunities and worldly advantages that we or they have lost, is the fact that those places and the people in them, will no longer have a witness to Jesus among them. The bigger tragedy of this story is not that the man born blind can no longer be a part of the synagogue. The bigger tragedy is that that synagogue and the people in it will no longer have a witness to who Jesus is among them.

Second, the question I mentioned earlier bears repeating: “Who would want to be in a synagogue that does not have Jesus in it?” [Leithart, 63] When a social circle, or a place, or an institution wants to drive people out because they identify with Christ, then that group of people is saying that Jesus is not welcome to be present there. And while such social circles and institutions may offer many worldly benefits ... if Jesus is not present in them ... *then why do we want to be there?*

And third and finally, when the man is driven from the synagogue, it is *then* that he finds Jesus. And that makes it all worth it to him. And it should to us as well. Which brings us to our fourth theme of the path of discipleship.

Disciples of Jesus Christ are enlightened by Jesus Christ, they identify with Jesus Christ, they witness about Jesus Christ, and finally, *they worship Jesus Christ.*

And that is what we see in verses thirty-five through forty-one. The man is cast out, and Jesus comes to him. And we read in verse thirty-eight that the man confesses his faith in Christ and worships him.

And the impression we get is that for this man, being with Jesus – being healed by him, knowing him, worshipping him – that makes everything else worth it. *That* is the great reward. The hostility of the Pharisees, the distancing of his parents, the being thrown out of the synagogue – these all fade into the background as the man gets to be with and worship Christ.

As one commentator puts it: “If we do not share the blind man’s joyful relief when he finds Jesus, we do not know what the story means.” [Leithart, 63]

And what was true for the man born blind should also be true for us.

Now ... of course our emotions are fickle. Our minds get distracted. But even in a season of spiritual dryness, we should be able to step back, and look at our situation ... and realize that whatever it may cost us in this world, whatever we might lose here ... still it is worth it – it is unquestionably worth it. To be with Jesus, to know him both now and for eternity – to dwell with him forever, this far outweighs the light momentary afflictions we may face in this life.

And we experience that reality of being with Jesus even now, as we live our Christian lives, as we come to Christ in prayer, as we read his Word, as we fellowship with his people, and most centrally as we gather for worship on the Lord’s Day. There we get a foretaste of what we will one day experience perfectly and forever.

Perhaps, after hearing all this – after considering the path of discipleship as seen in the man born blind – perhaps you are struck by how far you fall short of living in this pattern.

If that is you, then verse thirty-nine is key. Jesus there says “I came into this world, that those who do not see may see”

As we consider the pattern of discipleship, we can tend to focus on our first turning to Christ in faith – of that initial renewal by Christ, anointing of the Holy Spirit, and washing of regeneration. And that of course is crucial.

But that foundational turn in our lives is not the only one. The Christian life is to be a life of continual repentance – over and over again. We are to die to ourselves daily. We are to turn to Christ afresh hour by hour. We need to be illuminated, enlightened and made new every day of our Christian lives.

And so this pattern before us in our text, for the Christian, is not a one-time pattern, but a life-long pattern. We are again and again coming to Christ that he might enable us to see, that we might identify with him afresh, worship him anew, and go out and witness to who he is and what he has done with renewed conviction and courage.

And so, when you see your lack – when you see where you fall short, do not be discouraged, but turn again to Christ to be renewed again by his grace, and then, once again, vigorously pursue the callings of witness and worship.

For Jesus said, “I came into this world, that those who do not see may see.”

And if you find yourself unmoved, then make sure that you also hear Jesus’s warning at the end of this chapter. For he adds also that he came that “those who see may become blind.”

Jesus’s interaction with the Pharisees in verses forty and forty-one shows us what he means by that. Throughout the chapter the Pharisees have proven themselves to be spiritually blind. And as the Pharisees protest, what we need to appreciate is that their biggest problem is not that they are spiritually blind, but that they are spiritually blind *while claiming* that they can spiritually see. Because, while Jesus can and will heal the blind, those who claim they can see will never come to him for healing, and so will not be healed, but will only sink deeper into their blindness. [Augustine, XLIV.17]

If you have not yet come to trust in the Lord – if you have been telling yourself that you can see just fine on your own – then our text urges you turn from your self-confidence and cling to Christ, that he might illuminate your heart.

For the opportunity to do that will not last forever. If you continue to resist him, then one day the night will come, and your blindness and isolation will last forever. [Augustine, XLIV.6]

But to all who see their need, Jesus calls you to come to him, that he might heal you. He calls you to himself that he might illuminate your heart, that he might identify you with himself, that he might send you out as his hands and feet, and that he would dwell with you both now and forever.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

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