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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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**The Third Sunday after the Epiphany**

**January 25, 2015**

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**“Who is Jesus?”**

John 9 (Jesus Heals a Man Born Blind)

Rev. David K. Groth

## Collect of the Day

Almighty and everlasting God, mercifully look upon our infirmities and stretch for the hand of Your majesty to heal and defend us; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

In the Gospel lesson, John heals a man born blind. That's great for him, but it troubles his neighbors because things like that usually don't happen. In first century Galilee, those born blind usually remained blind for the rest of their days. And so everyone wants to know who is this guy? Who is this Jesus? That's a question that's still being asked today? Who is Jesus? Is he who he says he is, or was he an imposter, a fraud or perhaps a megalomaniac?

Some in John 9 say he's a sinner, because he healed the man on a Sabbath, and of course, sinners are not of God. The blind man initially calls him a prophet. That's easy and doesn't require any faith. Anyone can say that. Upon further questioning, the blind man says he believes Jesus is of God, whatever that means. You could probably say the same of a tree or a sparrow. But by the end of the account, the man has crossed the threshold into faith, for he says to Jesus, "Lord, I believe" and then he gets down and worships Jesus. And what does Jesus do? He takes it. He stays put. He receives the man's worship. Who is this guy? What kind of person would allow another to worship him?

Huston Smith wrote a book entitled, "The World's Religions". It's an old book, and yet is still used on many college campuses. He says in the history of the world there have only been two prominent and influential figures whose lives were so extraordinary, so remarkable that the people around them not only asked, "Who are you?", but "What are you?" Those two were Buddha and Jesus. In both cases people wanted to worship them because they'd never seen such compassion and integrity and wisdom. And Smith points out that the responses of Buddha and Jesus to that question were completely opposite. Buddha said don't worship me. I'm not a god. Don't look to me, look to my

dharma, my doctrine, my teaching and that will show you how to commune with god.

Jesus, on the other hand, accepted worship without reservation. He never said “I’m not God.” He never said “I am a god.” He said, “I am the God.” Whenever anyone worshiped him, (the blind man in our text, or Peter when he said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!” Or Thomas when he cried out, “My Lord and my God”), whenever anyone worshiped him Jesus stood there and calmly took it. He didn’t say, “No, no! Don’t go there. Don’t worship me.” He stood there and took it.

Now, over the centuries there have been many who claimed to be god. As a student in Madison I once bumped into one on State Street. (I think there may have been something illegal in his bloodstream.) Many have claimed to be god but they’ve never been able to garnish much of a following except for a small number of marginalized, off-balanced, ragtag, disenfranchised people. But Jesus is different. He made incredible claims but also got people to believe. Jesus claimed to be God, and wanted the allegiance and fidelity of everyone on earth.

There’s no thoughtful person who can walk away from that without studying it. Some say, “Oh, yeah, I know all about that. My parents dragged me to church and Sunday School. But when in college my doubts became greater than my faith, and I don’t really believe it.” Friends, the magnitude of Jesus’ claims mean that you better not just *doubt* that he’s not God. You had better *know* he’s not God. The magnitude of his claims are that great.

What if you got a letter from a prestigious law office in London saying, “Please come see us. We have determined you are a long lost heir of the British throne.” Your first reaction might be, “How can this be? I’m Norwegian!” And yet, you’re not even going to make a phone call? The magnitude of Jesus’ claims means you better not just doubt it’s not true. You had better know it’s not true, because if there’s a chance it’s true and you miss it, your life is ruined. Jesus said, “I am the Way, and the Truth,

and the Life. No one comes to the Father except by me.” That’s quite a claim! You had better know it’s not true.

If he was a crackpot that would be one thing. Others have claimed to be god, but I don’t think it’s necessary for everyone to study the life of David Koresh, for instance, or that crazed fellow I met on State Street, or Kim Jung Un. They don’t have the evidence to back up their claims. Many emperors have made the claim, but they’re dead and gone and mostly forgotten. But there is one, and look at the impact of his life. I would argue no one has had a greater impact on the world than Jesus. Look at the ethics he has inspired and the music and the artwork. Look at the data of Jesus. The magnitude of the claim and the magnitude of his impact on the world demands your thoughtful study of the facts!

So, “Who is Jesus?” First, he was a man who claimed to be God.

Second, as he went about teaching and preaching, the people around him saw him do things that looked like miracles. (Not parlor tricks, miracles!) They saw him heal the sick and walk on water and calm storms and raise the dead. I’m not saying they were miracles, at this point, I’m just saying thousands of people saw him do what appeared to be miracles. Great crowds started to follow him in part because of those miracles.

Third, he not only claimed to be God, he not only did what appeared to be miracles, but he convinced the people closest to him, the people who lived with him, the apostles and so on, he convinced them he was God.

There are people today who can become our heroes. Athletes, celebrities, and so on. But then one of their family members or a close friend or an ex-wife will write a tell-all book about what they’re really like, and the whole hero worship thing goes out the window. This is why so many who say they are god never have any impact. There were always people around them who saw the selfishness, the pettiness, the lust and lewdness, the mental imbalance.

If as a young man in my thirties I had started going

around telling others I was god, I'm pretty sure my two brothers would have had something to say about that. The two brothers of Jesus, James and Jude, who grew up with him, who knew him better than just about anyone . . . they became important and influential leaders of the Christian church.

Keep in mind also that the last people on earth who could possibly believe that a human being could be God were first century Jews. In many places of the world god is a sort of life force in everybody and everything so it's not that unusual to say a guy is a manifestation of god. In the west, the Romans and the Greeks had a lot of gods taking on disguises, looking like human beings and pretty much acting a lot like petty human beings. But the Jews believed in the transcendence of God. They believe God created the world but was far above the world. So for thousands of years it had been drilled into the Jewish mindset, never, ever worship anything that is created. Never worship the sun or moon or stars. Never think of God within a tree. Never, ever worship a man! Let there be no graven images. The last people to believe a man could be God were first century Jews, and yet thousands became convinced Jesus is God. The people surrounding Jesus not only heard the claim to be God. They believed it.

After he was crucified, hundreds of people confessed and attested that they saw him risen. 1 Corinthians 15, "He was raised on the third day and . . . then appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, He appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living. . . Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also" (vv. 4ff).

Why do you think Paul told his audience that most of those five hundred are still living? He's challenging them to check it out for themselves. "Don't take my word for it. Go ahead and talk to the eyewitnesses and ask them what they saw!"

Moreover, the experience of seeing him alive had such an impact on the eyewitnesses that they went to spread the

news. Many of them would eventually die because of it.

Kenneth Scott Latourette was a professor of ancient history at Yale. He wrote, “Why among all the cults and philosophies competing in the Greco Roman world, why did Christianity succeed and outstrip all others? Why did it succeed despite getting more opposition than any others? Why did it succeed though it had no influential backers in high places, but consisted mainly of the poor and slaves? How did it succeed so completely that it forced the most powerful state in history to come to terms with it and then outlived the very empire that sought to destroy it? It is clear, that at the very beginning of Christianity there must have occurred a vast release of energy, perhaps unequal in our history. Without it the course of the Christian religion is inexplicable.” That vast release of energy, we say, is the resurrection with Pentecost close on its heels.

So, Jesus was a man who claimed to be God. People around him saw him do things that looked like miracles. He convinced people around him, even those close to him, that he was God. After he died, hundreds saw him risen, and that experience so completely transformed them that, at great risk, they went out into the world to spread the news.

How do you account for those facts? How do you account for the data of his life? You got to do something. You can’t just ignore it or try not to think about it.

Most people get out from under the data this way. They say he’s a legend. They say we cannot know any of that really happened. They say his followers were so amazed with him, so enthralled and impressed by him that they began to weave tales about him.

You’ve played whisper down the alley where you say one thing and pass it along to the next person and the thing morphs and grows and changes. And so they say the tales were embellished. They say the early church began to make up stories and put words into Jesus’ mouth to meet their needs and eventually, many years later, they were written down and codified and called Holy Scripture. So people get out from underneath the data by saying we have no idea what

Jesus really said. We can't know what was genuine and what wasn't. You cannot read the Gospels as history.

There are a number of problems with this. First, the New Testament is not written as legend. It's written as history. At the beginning of his Gospel Luke writes, "Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have happened among us . . . Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent, Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught." So Luke takes on the role of a sort of investigative journalist. The point is, it's not written as a legend. It's written as history. So when you read Luke, it's either history or it's a book of lies. It's either history or it's an absolute and intentional hoax to mislead people. There is really no in between.

So for a moment, let's assume the worst. Assume Luke has written a book of lies and tales. Most scholars today believe Matthew, Mark and Luke were written about 50 AD. And Paul wrote his epistles between the years of 50 and 60 AD. Why is this important? Because if you're going to fabricate, if you're going to create stories and fables about someone, the only way you're going to pull it off is to wait until the eyewitnesses who knew him are all dead.

If I decided to write that back when I was in seminary we rioted against the faculty due to excessive and burdensome homework. And if I were to say that during this riot one building was torched and several of the worst offenders among the faculty were flogged, that story would never get off the ground because there are way too many eye witnesses still living. If I were to write such a thing, my classmates would say, "Hold on a minute. I was there. Groth has clearly fallen off his perch. Nothing of the sort happened." To pull it off, I'd have to wait until they were all dead before publishing it.

Just about all the New Testament books, (and no one disagrees with this anymore), just about the New Testament books were written within the lifetime of the eyewitnesses. How can they be absolute and intentional lies? People would be coming out the woodwork saying, "You know, I lived in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus and I don't remember any of

that. I don't remember any miracles. I don't remember anyone talking about his crucifixion or his resurrection, and I certainly never met any one of those 500 people who saw Jesus alive." How can a faith be based on lies when there are still so many eye witnesses living?

And if it were a lie, do you think people would be willing to die for it? Think of the twelve. It would have had to have been a tremendous conspiracy that all of them would together decide to die for a hoax. It's possible that all these people died for a lie. Maybe. It's possible. But I don't think the Christian faith could have ever gotten off the ground. They couldn't have said Jesus did all these miracles and rose from the dead because of when they were saying it! It was just too early. That generation was still living.

Just about every Christmas and Easter Public Television loves to do a special on "Jesus", and they line up a number of talking heads who say we really have no idea what Jesus said or did because Scripture cannot be relied upon. They put themselves forward as mainstream historians, but they are not.

And remember, there's a bias. We have much more evidence about the life of Jesus than we do about Caesar's Gallic wars which took place around the same time as Jesus earthly ministry. But you don't sit down and say, "I wonder if Caesar's Gallic wars really happened, because if it's true, I will have to change the way I live." Whether or not they happened is irrelevant to the way you have to live. But no one can read the Gospels without a bias, because if they are true, unlike Caesar's Gallic wars, you will have to change the way you live tomorrow. If it's true, you've just lost control of your life. If it's true, suddenly you are accountable to him. You can no longer live the way you feel like living. You have to find out what he says and try to follow him. Who on earth could possibly be objective with all that on the line?

Imagine a judge who's scheduled to hear a case about a huge pharmaceutical company charged with fraud. What if that judge was a major investor in that company? What if that judge would stand to lose tens of thousands of dollars if that company was found to be fraudulent? Common sense and the



laws of this land would say he has a conflict of interest and cannot hear the case.

But when you read the bible, you have an even greater conflict of interest than he does. If this is found to be true you stand to lose control of your whole life. Knowing you have that conflict of interest, you better make sure that you double and triple check every one of your doubts because they could be prejudiced. You have to double and triple check every one of your bits of skepticism because you have a tremendous motive *not* to believe it.

Some say Jesus is a good man, but he's not God. But have they ever really read what he says? He says, "If you want to follow me you have to hate your father and your mother." He says, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given me." He says, "I am the only Way to heaven." He says, if there's anything keeping you from following me, get rid of it. If it's an eye, pluck it out. If it's a hand, cut it off. It's not worth losing me. Who would say such things? No good person would say anything like that. But God might possibly say such things. So, this person is either God, or he's completely off his rocker. He's either God or he's a terrible liar. But he can't be a good man. Reject him, hate him, oppress and kill his followers . . . but none of this nonsense that he's a good man, a good teacher, just not God.

Some say maybe he was a liar. Some say maybe he was a lunatic. I'll treat them together for the sake of time. In both cases they're saying he managed to fool his followers. But here's the problem with that. Look at the quality of his teachings. It's not the ravings of a madman. GK Chesterton put it this way, "If I found a key on the road and discovered it opened a particular lock in my house, I'd assume the key was made by a lock maker. And if I find a set of [ancient] teachings that has proven itself to be of such universal validity that it has fascinated and satisfied millions of people in every century including the best minds in history and the simplest hearts, that it has made itself at home in nearly every culture, inspired masterpieces of beauty in every field of art, continues

to grow rapidly in lands where even a century ago the name of Jesus was not even heard, if such teaching so obviously fits the locks of so many human souls in so many times and places, are they likely to be the work of a deceiver or a fool? In fact, it is more likely that they were designed [not by a lock maker] but by the heart maker.”

Look at his life. Is that life the life of a liar or lunatic? Read how he was tested by the Pharisees and you try to come up with a better line, a better answer! You try to come up with better parables! Do you realize what kind of person you’d have to be to make this stuff up? If somebody made all this up we’d be having the same discussion asking who is this incredible person who made all this up? What kind of person could this be?

Nothing Jesus does or says in Scripture falls short. In fact, he’s always surprising you because he’s better than you can imagine. Why? They are the surprises of perfection. He is a combination of virtues we’ve never seen together in one person: tenderness without weakness, strength without hubris, humility without the slightest lack of confidence, holiness and unbending convictions without the slightest lack of approachability, power without insensitivity, passion without prejudice, the harshest judgment on the self satisfied, yet the most gentle kindness to the broken and the marginal. Never inconsistent. Never a false step.

When we describe him, can’t you see just a little bit of what they saw two thousand years ago? Can’t you feel just a little bit of what they felt, and why they got down and worshipped him? Can’t you see why the early Christian church grew like wild fire even though it was fiercely persecuted?

What’s the alternative? St. Thomas Aquinas put it this way: The only alternative is that you believe in an even greater miracle. If Jesus Christ did not happen, then one half of the Roman Empire was deceived by the biggest lie in history.

He’s not a legend. He can’t be a good man. It’s very improbable that he’s a deceiver or delusional. So where does that leave us? It leaves us here: If you get rid of your bias

against the possibility of God, it's hard to believe he is who he says he is . . . but it's harder not to. It's difficult to believe he is who he says he is, but the theories you have to believe to get out from underneath it all are even more problematic and have even more holes. As a result, we say, "He is who he says he is."

If that's true, you can't have just a lukewarm view of him. It will have to be either hot or cold. You either 1) hate him or 2) fear him and think he's the most dangerous person that ever lived, or 3) you love him and are trusting in him for life and salvation. Those are the only alternatives that are rational. Hate him. Fear him. Or love and trust in him.

The great 17<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Paschel would have us ask, "What's the worst case scenario here?" If it's a lie and yet you believe it, what's the worse case scenario? You live a lifetime of unnecessary piety, you suffer through a bunch of unnecessary sermons and you live with a false sense of hope. On the other hand if it's true and you refuse to believe it, that means your life will eventually end and then your worst nightmare will come true because you have rejected the only one who can save you. There will be no one else who will be able to help you or even hear you. Said another way, the wisest course is the one with the most acceptable worse case scenario.

Finally, if Jesus is who he says he is, it's great news. You know why? Because he says morality and goodness are not the answer. They're not going to get you into heaven. So even though you've not been a good person all your life, don't talk yourself out of it, because God is gracious and merciful and loves to save.

Buddha says I am not god. Look to my teaching. If you just live a good life that will be enough. But Jesus says, "You will never be moral enough to reach God. Your righteousness won't make the cut. I have come to live the life you should have lived. I have come to die the death you should have died to pay for your sins. Believe in me. Trust in me. I haven't come to harm you or condemn you. I've come to save you.

Buddha says, "This is the way." Jesus says, "I am the

Way.” Buddha says, “I can show you the way to god if only you live according to these principles.” Jesus says, “Get real. You’ll never be good enough. I am the Way, the Truth and the Life for you and for your salvation.” Amen.

