

Old Testament lesson – 1 Samuel 16:1-13
New Testament lesson – John 9:1-41

Faith examples

Over the years, I have heard a number of ways to approach a passage of Scripture to gain some benefit from it. One of the things I have found useful, for sermons as well as for personal study, is to look at people in a passage or a story and try to determine if there is an example to follow or one to avoid.

We learn from examples from a very early age. Infants learn to walk and talk by the example of others, mostly parents and siblings. Children also learn from other examples of parents and siblings.

I know I have told this story before, but my father taught me something about which examples to follow when I was three years old. At that time, there were lots of role models in TV shows and movies who smoked. Ads proclaimed which cigarettes were recommended by the most doctors. If you young people think I am making this up, Google it, or better yet, go to a library and find old magazines from the 1950s and look for those ads. It won't take long to find some.

So at the impressionable age of three, I wanted to follow the example of the tough guys on TV, not to mention the example of my parents. So I asked my dad if I could smoke a cigarette. He handed me his lit cigarette and said, "Take a big deep breath." I immediately found out this was an example I did not want to follow. I have been grateful ever since for Dad's counter-intuitive instinct that turned me away from cigarettes forever.

Our youngest grandson is 2½. His older brothers are 5 and 9. Guess who is always trying to keep up with and imitate his older brothers? When we pray for our grandsons, Annette and I often pray that God will guide Owen in what he imitates, so that he will imitate things he should imitate and avoid the examples he should not follow. We could all pray that for ourselves, even when we are old...er.

In our OT lesson, we don't really have much material in the way of examples except for Samuel the prophet. Everyone else is mostly

supporting cast. The elders barely make an appearance, though their fear of the prophet might be an example. We would have to look deeper to find out what they might have done to make them fear Samuel.

They were a fair distance from Samuel's home. Why was he here? Was it a peaceable trip? Or was he coming at God's instruction because of some sin they had committed? Or maybe he was fleeing from King Saul, as trouble had developed between Saul and the LORD. I hope the members of this church will not follow this example when either Joel or I come to visit. We are pretty peaceable, and you have nothing to fear when we visit. We don't even come around to ask people to give more money, which does happen at more than a few churches.

Jesse provides very little example for us, and neither do his sons. They show up and let Samuel direct them in consecrating themselves and preparing to offer a sacrifice. Samuel takes a look at them, and they send for David when asked, and David shows up and receives his anointing. Ostensibly, it is part of the consecration. Perhaps Samuel let David play some special role in the sacrifice so as to hide his true intent: at God's direction he was anointing David to replace Saul as Israel's king. Samuel keeps that purpose hidden from everyone, including David.

So is Samuel an example to follow? He was a prophet, after all. Surely his example of faith and obedience must be a good example to aspire to follow. Eh, maybe not so much. When God tells him where to go and why, his immediate response is fear. The creator of the universe has directed him to go and anoint a new king, and Samuel is afraid that God can not protect him from the current king. Samuel finally agrees to go, but only when God provides him with a suitable cover story to disguise his true purpose.

No, on this occasion, Samuel is at first an example to avoid. God is trustworthy. If we are certain he has told us to do something or go

somewhere, we should trust God and obey. God will protect, and God will provide what we need.

As the sons of Jesse are brought before Samuel, he provides another example to avoid. He sees only with his eyes. He sees the great stature of the three oldest sons, and then the next four who are not named. And yet, God had not selected any of these. David was apparently smaller, and we might wonder whether the youngest son had trouble competing for food against seven older brothers. But it was David whom the LORD had chosen. God made it clear to Samuel that he, the LORD, looked at men differently than how the prophet was looking on this occasion.

I think we are to believe that David was rather clueless about what had just happened. It only became clear with time, though it is certainly possible that he sensed the Spirit of the LORD from this point forward.

He would be anointed two more times to become king: once as the king of Judah, and once as king of all Israel. But he would first enter the service of King Saul because an evil spirit troubled Saul. Music helped to calm Saul, and he asked for someone who could play well. One of servants told him, "Behold, I have seen a son of Jesse the Bethlehemite, who is skillful in playing, a man of valor, a man of war, prudent in speech, and a man of good presence; and the LORD is with him." And that, your honor, is how the trouble began. But those are stories for other days. I am not sure why at this point in time someone would have said that David was a man of war, unless this servant was counting stories of David driving wild animals away from his father's sheep.

Our NT lesson gives us a bit broader selection of examples to consider. First up: the disciples. They show themselves to be slaves to the mistaken beliefs of their time. They conclude that for this man to be born blind, someone must have sinned. And it must have been a grievous sin for the man to be born blind. The disciples want to be good theological students, so they ask Jesus

for more spiritual insight. Was his blindness his fault or that of his parents? Surely Jesus would know whose sin was responsible.

I admit that I am helped by hindsight here, but should they not have realized by this time that Jesus did not follow or believe the many traditions that had been piled upon the Law? And there was nothing in the Law of Moses that said if a child was born blind it must be the result of sin by the parents or by the child. And hadn't Moses once characterized young children as having no knowledge of good and evil? How could an infant sin if it did not know good and evil?

So Jesus corrected their misconception. This man was born blind to provide an opportunity for God's works to be made manifest. It's the same today. When a child is born handicapped in some significant way, it becomes an opportunity for God's people to show God's love for that child by providing help to the parents and care for the child. I saw this many times when Annette was teaching profoundly disabled students at Transitions School. A hard-hearted person looks at such a child and asks why that child was not aborted to avoid all that suffering. People like my wife see such a child and they know that child can feel love and joy in spite of their suffering. They see that child and know that human life is human life, period.

Jesus saw the blind man and applied the power and love of God. The man was healed. That was a possibility that had not occurred to the disciples. Their thinking was restricted by years of conditioning, and they did not trust God to do something unexpected.

This brings us to the man. When he left Jesus, he was still blind, and his eyes were dirty with mud, made with spit. It's a little disgusting, when you think about it. How would you react if you heard someone spit on the dry, dusty ground and then you felt them rubbing mud on your eyes? Actually, I suppose it makes good sense that he wanted to go wash his eyes.

But if this incident follows directly after the interactions in chapter 8 around the Temple, there were other pools that were closer. The man had to trust Jesus to follow his instructions. It was a good thing he did; his faith – his trust in Jesus – was probably partly responsible for his gift of sight.

I remember when I tried on my first pair of glasses at age nine. It was amazing to see everything clearly. I can not imagine what a thrill it must have been for this man to *see anything* for the very first time as an adult.

No wonder he was so excited. No wonder he was so grateful and had only good things to say about Jesus. No wonder he had absolutely no qualms about standing up to the religious authorities.

Ah, yes – the religious authorities. Perhaps they were not all that religious. Or at least, they had no real faith, no real *trust* in God. Sometimes I am irritated by people who think faith in Jesus that includes a personal relationship with him is so different from religion that the two must be mutually exclusive. You can have one without the other, but you can also have both. It is important to know which is which, and it is necessary to know which is more important for eternal life. But practicing and even enjoying religious traditions does not mean you don't have a relationship with Jesus.

Now, if the disciples exhibited some limitations because of their trust in religious traditions and conventions, the Jewish authorities around Jerusalem displayed almost nothing else except such limitations.

They could stare right into the face of the Messiah who had healed a blind man, and still they did not trust God. Instead, they had faith only in the human traditions that had accumulated on top of Scripture over the years.

When we encounter the man's parents we might be struck by how oblivious they were to the obvious. But can we judge them? They were blinded by fear of being cast out of the synagogue. How would you react if you were

told that you must deny some obvious truth or risk being kicked out of your church or your country or your social circle?

History is filled with people who made the hard choice under such circumstances, but the blind man's parents are not among those courageous heroes. They sidestep the questions of the elders, deferring to their son. They trusted whatever they needed to trust in order to maintain their place in the social order.

Every one of us has faith. We trust in something. In fact, most of us have trust in many things. For example, we trust cars. We trust that when we drive, the brakes will work, the engine will work, the bumpers will not suddenly fall off or the engine explode. Our faith in our cars is almost always well-founded. When the cars do fail, it is very disappointing.

We trust in our government. In spite of all our complaining about this and that, we trust government to provide certain services and to keep us safe. When it fails us, we are not only disappointed, we feel cheated and unsafe.

We trust our social order. We trust the rules that unofficially govern our society, rules that are unwritten and often unspoken. There are rules in the back of our mind that tell us not to rock the boat. Don't say anything that might offend someone. Don't talk about politics or religion.

You can probably guess where I'm going with this. You can probably guess which person in our lessons I am going to recommend.

Perhaps the obvious choice is Jesus. We are supposed to be like Jesus. He is the ideal, the goal we want to strive for when it comes to trusting God. Of course, we will always be disappointed in how well we do at achieving that goal. That's what grace is for.

In second place, and still a worthy example to try to follow, is the blind man. He did not hesitate to speak out about Jesus and to proclaim how much Jesus had done for him.

But he might be a hard example to follow for many of us. We would have to feel as if God had

done something miraculous for us, as Jesus did for the blind man. He has, of course, but that fact is not always obvious to us. Even when we realize how much God has done for us, we seldom experience a change as dramatic as the blind man did. So our trust and our enthusiasm seldom reach the level reached by the blind man after he received his sight.

Of course, we definitely want to avoid following the examples of the Jewish authorities or even the blind man's parents. God forbid that our trust in him be limited so severely by traditions and rules regarding our social behavior.

That leaves us with the prophet Samuel and the disciples, who are rather similar as examples of faith. All of them trusted God, but they experienced certain limitations to their trust. That's probably where most of us find ourselves, though we may trust God less than a prophet or an apostle.

So we can see in our own lives faith in God, somewhat hampered by our faith in other things. We have faith in our social order, faith in rules and traditions that dictate our behavior in certain circumstances. We see the enthusiasm and the openness of the healed blind man, and perhaps we think, "I wish I could speak up like that." Or maybe we think, "I haven't experienced anything

like that, but maybe if I did I would be more vocal than I am."

Following positive examples of faith that we find in Scripture is not easy. It takes prayer, and work, and practice. It takes reading the Bible and finding good examples of trust in God that can instruct us. It takes a bit of self-examination to determine where our limitations are.

It takes time. Praying with others can help. That's why I hope people in the church will follow the example of the women who meet on Monday mornings. Even if you just happen to run into someone else from the church, take two minutes to pray with and for each other. Two minutes – one minute apiece. It's not that much time.

Maybe that is the first of our social limitations that needs to go. You probably won't find many examples of faith among ordinary people who follow the rules and practices of our culture. Maybe that's why our culture seems to be crumbling and going downhill. Who knows? Maybe we are called to be part of the solution just by praying with one another to encourage ourselves in our faith.

If we do that, we can *be* examples of faith. Now, wouldn't that be something? Amen.