

**Happily Ever After  
Finding Life in Jesus  
Welcomed Home  
John 9:1-12, 33-41 3-9-08**

**(\*Read Main Text\*)**

It's baseball season again. Parks are filling with the cracking sound of bats, mitts snapping at fast balls and vendors will soon be calling out for peanuts. I don't really follow baseball anymore. But I still remember my favorite teams growing up: Oakland "A"s, Baltimore Orioles...Chicago Bears! ☺ I had a brief career in baseball. I played two seasons; third grade and my junior year of High School. I don't know what to say; I guess I was back by popular demand!

I was a second baseman, a third-stringer and a fourth man out of three! But I actually did see some playing time. One of the joys about baseball is that everybody gets a chance to hit. You grab a bat, step up to the plate and take your turn in the batters box. Now inside that box, that's where I became familiar with the Umpire's language. It's not that it was bad; he wasn't swearing or bad mouthing or anything like that. Truth of the matter is, he had very little to say to me; usually just two words is all..."YOU'RE OUT!"

With that prompt dismissal, I'd take my bat back to the dug out, take off my helmet and have a seat. Now even the best multi-million dollar hitters in the world still share that same experience 7 out of 10 times at bat, but it doesn't change the fact that walking back to the bench can be a disappointing journey, and sometimes, depending on the nature and status of the game, a heart-breaking and humiliating journey that belongs to you and you alone at that moment. Truth is, there are no players, and there are no people, who desire and enjoy the experience of being – "Put out."

One day, Jesus met a man born blind whose very condition led to a form of social exclusion and isolation. While his disciples pondered the cause of his congenital circumstances, Jesus lifted their eyes to see the glory and power of God through the healing of his sight – demonstrating what he claimed, "I am the light of the world!" Only Jesus can help us see (physically and spiritually). Since all of this happened on the Sabbath, and making mud was prohibited work on the Sabbath, the religious authorities found their wedge and applied pressure. Questions needed to be answered. Someone needed to account. Court was in session. The blind man was brought forward; he stepped up to the plate, and after a series of "pitches" from the Pharisees (some hard balls, some curves and sliders), they finally called him "OUT!" The "Seeing-Man" headed for the bench.

This was not a moment filled with grace and tact: The Pharisees said to him, "**You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!**" **And they threw him out**" (John 9:34 TNIV). I love the nuanced spin the CEV brings to this passage: "**The leaders told the man, "You have been a sinner since the day you were born! Do you think you can teach us anything?" Then they said, "You can never come back into any of our**

**meeting places!**" (John 9:34 CEV). Excommunicated, banished and exiled.

I want to speak to you today about finding life in Jesus Christ even after you've been hurt or rejected. You see, it's not just in baseball that people hear the disappointing and painful words... **(\*show umpire image\*)** "YOU'RE OUT!" Those words have been heard in broken marriages and families with troubled teens. They are heard in conflicted offices and resentful neighborhoods. They are heard in estranged relationships and even in legalistic religion. But according to the gospel, those are not the last words! The blind man was put out—but he still found life in Jesus!

God's purpose in all of history has always been to send a different signal: **(\*show welcome home image\*)** An indication that you are wanted, welcomed and loved. That a place has been prepared for you, a home for all of His wayward sons and daughters. It is God's prevailing hope that his church (which was established as a voice-piece for His kingdom - Eph. 3:10) would be that welcoming agent in a broken and hurting world – saying - "WELCOME HOME!" The Pharisees got so stuck on their own rules that they refused to acknowledge the testimony and power of a changed life. Only God can heal. They threw him out!

As a pastor and "religious leader," I know that I am deeply troubled by the thought of being the cause or reason for someone to leave this church or the faith. Nobody really sets out to be a destructor. I know that religious leaders and churches have not always been the gracious presence or presentation that Christ would offer. We have at times wounded and shamed people with a variety of scarlet letters – reminders and labels of their disgrace. If you are one of those wounded people today, if you've heard the words "YOU'RE OUT!" in your past and have been dis-fellowshipped unjustly, I want to apologize to you for that harm and ask that you might speak to me or another pastor so we can help reconcile with God's family and heal old wounds.

To be fair, we must also say that some people have unjustly misused the broken-and-healing family that we call "the Church" as an excuse to justify their hardness of heart and resistance toward God's sovereign grace which calls them and all of us into love, acceptance and forgiveness so that we can be a healing community. Saying that the Christians are nothing more than judgmental religious hypocrites is both a cop out and a disingenuous and unjust allegation. This knife cuts on both sides, and in each case, harm has been done.

There's a rather comical yet poignant clip that's found in the 1972 movie "Sounder" starring Paul Winfield and Cicely Tyson. The story is about a 1930's sharecropping family in Louisiana that's hit upon some hard times when Dad is unjustly sent to jail. There's a scene after his release when they are walking past a White church (which is not intended to be a description of the siding). It becomes the occasion for a brief but very illuminating conversation: Let's listen in **(\*Play clip\*)**.

Jesus wants to get inside this church. Are we going to let him in? Will we see him as "one-of-us?" He is going to be appearing to us in all kinds of unfinished, unrefined forms. He'll come, at times, with some rough edges,

mixed motives, lame excuses and even bad habits. (**\*Show combined signs\***) Which sign will he see you holding? Now the Bible is very clear about the legitimacy of an appropriate kind of excommunication process or "dis-fellowshipping" of someone out of the body. As rare and as distasteful as that may be, it is in the Bible. Jesus' words in Matthew 18: 15-20 and Paul's instructions in 1 Corinthians 5: 1-13 and 2 Thessalonians 3: 14-15 give clear guidelines and parameters for appropriate and restorative discipline in the church. Problem is, they have rarely been used rightly. In fact, we even have provisions in the UMC for church trials (not just for clergy) but also for laity who come under accusation of crime, immorality or "disobedience to the discipline and order of the church" (§ 2702.3 – 2004 UMBOD).

More often than not, excommunication has been a cause of injustice in the church; even the threat of it can be an evil manipulation of power. I wonder how many people there are today in our society who are just like the blind man was after his healing:

- ✦ **Awakened to spiritual power**
- ✦ **Put off by the religious establishment**
- ✦ **Ready and open to relationship?**

An increasing percentage of our population fits that description. They are ready to be found, welcomed and loved back into life. What do we see in the healed man's response: He's ready to believe, ready to be received and ready to give his life to something significant: **"Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" "Who is he, sir?" the man asked. "Tell me so that I may believe in him." Jesus said, "You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you." Then the man said, "Lord, I believe," and he worshiped him" (John 9:35-38 TNIV).**

Let me close with these thoughts today. What I love most about this story is that Jesus searched him out. The one who had been rejected and cast out was found by Jesus. Each one of us represents the church and Jesus to the people around us. What will they hear from us? In baseball, they like to sing, "For it's one, two, three strikes you're out..." Jesus said, **"Whoever comes to me I will never cast out" (John 6:37b ESV).** Welcome home son/daughter, welcome home!