

*Based on John 9. Healing, Rejection, and The Church of Last Resort.*

Before the Rev. Dr. Jane Adams Spahr became midwife to the movement for full inclusion of the LGBTQIA+ community in the life and ministry of the Presbyterian Church, she was just another pastor in just another parish doing her best to love God and serve her congregation.

Her loving husband supported her ministry. Her beautiful children brought her great joy. Her congregation loved her as she loved them. But something just wasn't right, and Janie struggled and fretted to figure out what that *something* was.

After much prayer and much discernment, the reason became clear. There was absolutely nothing wrong with Janie's husband or her children or her ministry. And there was absolutely nothing wrong with Janie, herself. That feeling Janie felt in the pit of her gut that something wasn't quite right was in fact the wisdom of her soulful self calling her into greater wholeness. Janie realized she was a lesbian.

Janie was lucky. Her husband understood completely and supported her without question. They decided to tell the children, which also went well. It turned out that everyone whom Janie had loved so well for so long loved her right back when it mattered most. Everyone wanted to celebrate Janie's soulful self coming into wholeness. Janie's children were so excited that Janie had figured out how to live at peace with her soulful self that they shouted out what we hope all of our children here at SPC would shout if they learned the same thing from one of their parents:

*Mama, let's go tell the church!*

Can you imagine?! Janie's children had such a good experience of the church, such an affirming upbringing in the steadfast love of God and the call to love our neighbor as ourselves, the very first thing they thought of when it came to celebrating their mother's decision to live from her soulful self was to go tell the church. And isn't that the way it should be? When any one of us struggles and frets and prays through and discerns that *something that isn't quite right* in our lives and finally figures out what that *something* is and seeks to live from the truth of our soul, isn't the church the first place we should be able to go to celebrate?

That is what the man who is healed in our Lesson today from the Gospel of John wants to believe. *Alleluia*, he shouts, even in the middle of Lent, I can see what I could not see before. I have been made well, the healed man says, to the supposedly holiest of religious leaders in the supposedly holiest of religious cities at the culmination of a supposedly holy religious festival. Isn't it wonderful!?

Instead, the Pharisees, like the church that follows all too often in their footsteps, utterly overlook the healing in their midst. They hone in instead on the meaning of sin in the situation. Even the disciples of Jesus get caught up in whose sin was at fault for making the man blind. Sin, sin, sin, they just can't stop stepping all over themselves with concern about sin. We can almost hear Jesus in this Lesson groaning and rolling his eyes at all of them in their spiritual blindness: *You just don't get it!*

The Pharisees cannot see – or they simply refuse to see – what the Spirit of God, in The Way of Jesus *has made well*. They forget – or they simply choose to ignore – what the Sabbath is really all about, which is resting in the goodness of God and in the goodness of ourselves as ones who bear the image of God. Instead, the Pharisees,

like the church that all too often follows in their footsteps, turn the Holy Mystery of *Shabbat* – that day of living into God’s vision of an *eternal Shalom* – into a lifeless list of rules and regulations that keep themselves in and force others out.

How dare they?! the man who has been healed laments to Jesus. How dare *we*, in the church, when we do the same?! Truly there is no hurt quite like *church hurt*, when the very truth of our soul is rejected, abused, and even traumatized by those of us who should know better but often do not. Church hurt can lead us either to give up on the church altogether or, even worse in my opinion, to give up on the truth of our soulful self in order to fit in.

Jesus gives us another way. Rejected as he is, himself, Jesus seeks out the rest of the rejected, including as our Lesson continues. When Jesus learns that the man he healed has been driven out by the Pharisees, Jesus drops everything to find him again, to draw him back into an even more vibrant church of outcasts, misfits and rejects seeking to live from the soulful self, along with a few regular folks who revel in this way of being church. A way of being church, it turns out, that has always, throughout both ancient and modern history, formed the foundation of the coming reign of God.

Welcome to a world in which the wounded like you can be made well again, Jesus says in our Lesson today. It’s too bad the ones who think they are already well cannot see they need to be made well even more than you do, he laments with us. Even so, Jesus implies as the chapter concludes, it is not too late for anyone, including those among you Pharisees who really do want to have eyes to see and ears to hear.

Because, to be fair, the Pharisees really are divided among themselves, as the Lesson makes clear today. Neither they nor the church that all too often follows in their footsteps can be painted with one brush. Which is what Janie Spahr and her children learned as they did finally tell the church the truth of her soulful self when she came out as a lesbian.

For a long time the institutional church was divided. Too long in my opinion. For a long time many in the church honed in on the meaning of sin, utterly overlooking the healing that was occurring right here in our midst. But not all of us did that. Over time, as more and more of us began living from the soulful self, the church began to change. More and more people from across the theological spectrum began to see. And as the church began to change and the people began to see, an even more vibrant church has emerged, just like it did in the time of Jesus. We need not look any farther than the legacy of *this* church right here in Shepherdstown, WV, for evidence of that. Every time we practice our mission of radical hospitality for those who have been wounded by institutional religion, we reflect The Way and The Spirit of Jesus.

We do not always get it right, believe me, I know. I, myself, make many mistakes as the institutional representative of the institutional church, often without even knowing it. Even when we do choose to live from the soulful self, we will make mistakes and then correct them with outrageous forgiving, dramatic reconciling, and off the charts kindness. Oh, but when we *do* get it right, in our brave, fierce, visionary mending of the parts of the world that are within our reach! When we do get it right, what a miracle occurs! The very reign of God right here in our midst.

Living from the soulful self is surely not easy, as Janie would tell you, as Jesus would tell you, as the man who has been healed by Jesus would tell you. Living from the soulful self may cost us our jobs, it may cost us our friends, it may cost us our families, it may cost us our religion. Living from the soulful self cost Jesus his life.

But at the end of the day, once that *something that is not quote right* has been made clear, once our eyes have been opened, once our hearts have been healed, once our wisdom has been stoked in the Way and in the Spirit of Jesus, what choice do we really have? *Anything we do from the soulful self lightens the burdens of the world*, our poet says in our Reading today. And are we not desperate to do just that? Are we not desperate to heal the world and thereby heal ourselves? And vice versa?

*To strive to live from the soulful self is the most dramatic gift you can ever give to the world*, our poet says. And she is right. There really is no other way to live, in The Way and in the Spirit of Jesus.

*For more about living from the soulful self, check out "Today's Assignment, A Prescription From Dr. E.,I" by Clarissa Pinkola Estés: <https://www.mavenproductions.com/postscript-dr-estes>*