BEARING WITNESS TO JESUS IN HOSTILE CIRCUMSTANCES

A Study of Discipleship in the Healed Blind Man in John 9

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Abstrak:

Di tengah lingkungan di mana Yesus ditolak dan iman akan Yesus mendatangkan bahaya bagi mereka yang percaya kepada-Nya, seorang murid dipanggil untuk berani memberi kesaksian iman akan Yesus. Orang buta yang disembuhkan oleh Yesus menjadi simbol murid yang mendengarkan Yesus, taat kepada-Nya, dan dengan berani memberi kesaksian akan Yesus di hadapan mereka yang menolak Yesus. Ia beralih dari kebutaan menuju terang berkat perjumpaannya dengan Sang Terang. Di dalam dirinya, iman tidak berhenti sebagai sebuah pengakuan pribadi melainkan juga kesaksian dalam hidup bersama.

Kata Kunci:

Blindness, light, discipleship, listening, obeying, bearing witness

1. Introduction

It is a common reality among Christians all over the world that where there are risks and dangers for them and for their faith in Jesus, their Christian faith is alive and matures. On the contrary, when the Christians have no more challenges upon their faith, then faith weakens and loses its vitality. Risks and dangers are *chairos* for every believer to live faithfully as Jesus' disciple. Risks and dangers are stimuli for discipleship. Faith in Jesus is not only a personal confession to him, but also a public proclamation, a witness in front of other people, particularly in front of those who oppose faith in Jesus.

The story of the healed blind man in John 9 manifests such a situation. Since the beginning of his contact with Jesus, the blind man lives in trust and obedience to Jesus' word. He who never calls himself Jesus' disciple shows the characteristics of a disciple according the Gospel of John: remaining in Jesus' word and bearing witness to Jesus. His identity as Jesus' disciple becomes clear when he faces a hostile situation where his life is endangered precisely because of his faith in Jesus. He keeps himself

firmly in Jesus and daringly proclaims that Jesus comes from God, in front of those who judge Jesus to be a sinner.

This article is a study of John 9 attempting to show the characteristics of a disciple evident in the healed blind man. The evangelist presents this anonymous blind man as a model of a disciple who believes in Jesus' word and who bears witness to Jesus in a hostile circumstance. The first part is the study on John 9. The second part will be an overview of the discipleship in the Gospel of John. The last part is a synthesis of discipleship in John 9.

2. Exegesis of the Text

Context:

The story of the blind man in John 9 is found in the context of John 7-10 which constitutes a discourse on Jesus with regard to revelation and polemics. The revelation provokes various attitudes and reactions from those who listened to it: acceptance, doubt and rejection. The difference of attitudes toward Jesus' revelation appears also in the characters in John 9. The story begins after Jesus' revelation as the Light of the World (8:12-59). There Jesus promises the light of life for everyone who follows him (8:12). In that discourse, the Jews exhibit a hostile attitude toward Jesus that becomes more evident as Jesus is firmer in his revelation. Jesus' revelation comes to an end with a declaration that he is before Abraham (v. 58), while the rejection of the Jews comes to an end with their effort to stone Jesus (v. 59). The images of light and darkness, the intertwining of hostility and christological revelation set the scene for the narrative of John 9. In John 9, Jesus explicitly reveals himself as the Light of the World who gives light to those who are in darkness. Acceptance is the attitude of the healed blind man. Doubt is that of the parents. Rejection is the choice of the Jews.

John 9 contains revelation and polemic as well. In the context of revelation and polemic, the blind man appears on the stage. Conflict with the Jews is not experienced solely by Jesus, the Light of the World. It is experienced also by the blind man who regains his sight. He experiences the transition from blindness to sight; from darkness to light. He sees not only in physical sense, but he sees with his eyes of faith the one who has given sight to him. Now what he sees with his eyes of faith becomes a polemic against his fellow Jews. His process to be a disciple of Jesus is matured by the polemic against the Jews. The progression of his understanding of Jesus goes along with greater challenges of faith that he must face against the Jews. The more he is oppressed, the more he dares to express what he knows about who the one who has healed him. This progress of faith goes in the opposite direction of the progress of the rejection of the Jews. The deeper they enter into polemics, the more they do not believe in Jesus. They become more obdurate in their failure to see the truth.[1]

Structure:

J. L. Martyn recognized a two-level drama on the story: a healing in the context of Jesus' historical ministry and a drama which shows events in Johannine community. He studied the healing story of the blind man in seven parts in a concentric order.[2] In that concentric order, the interrogation of the parents by the Jews is considered as the most important part of the story. Mark W. G. Stibbe explained why the interrogation of the parents constitutes the core of the story. He argued that the interrogation "echoed the recent, traumatic experience of the original reader of the Gospel."[3] In his opinion, the narrator's comment in v. 22 is "a sure sign that the unit is the focal point."[4]

Noticing that this story contains a polemic that moves step-by-step to its climax, a concentric structure seems to neglect the escalation of the intensity of the polemic which will culminate in the interrogation of the blind man and his expulsion from among the Jews. Dorothy A. Lee reads the story in three acts (vv. 1-7, 8-34, 35-41) that contain eight scenes.[5]

Act 1 Healing of the Man and the Question of Judgment (9:1-7)

Scene 1 : Jesus and the disciples discuss sin and judgment (1-5) a
Scene 2 : Jesus heals the blind man's sight (6-7) b

Act 2 Interrogations and Escalating Conflict (9:8-34)

Scene 1 : Questioning of the man by his neighbors (8-12)
Scene 2 : Questioning of the man by the Pharisees and the beginning of the conflict (13-17)
Scene 3 : Hostile interrogation of the man's parents by the Jews (18-23)
Scene 4 : Hostile interrogation of the man by the Pharisees and rejection of him (24-34)

Act 3 Illumination of the Man and Judgment of the Jews (9:35-41)

Scene 1 : The man is given 'sight' by Jesus (35-38) b'
Scene 2 : Jesus and the Pharisees discuss sin and judgment (39-41) a'

This structure demonstrates a balance between Act 1 and Act 3 which both constitute the frame for the polemic in Act 2. What is interesting is that in John 9, it is not Jesus who enters into a polemic with the Jews. It is the blind man who received his sight from Jesus who stands against the Jews in a polemic. From one scene to another, there is an escalation of the intensity of the polemic. The climax of the polemic is the expulsion of the healed blind man by the Jews, but is not the end of the story. The two sides that have different opinions regarding Jesus will come face to face with Jesus who is the center of the polemic. The blind man gains sight, while the Jews who see are unable to see. The climax of the story in John 9 is Jesus' self revelation as the Son of Man and the healed blind man's faith in him.

Act 1 Healing of the Man and the Question of Judgment (9:1-7)

Scene 1: Jesus and the disciples → discussion about blindness and sin (1-5) a

Jesus and his disciples saw a man who has never seen since he was born blind. The disciples asked Jesus about who had sinned since he was born blind. This question arises out of a traditional concept about the relation between suffering (in this case, blindness) and sin. In this concept, the suffering is caused either by the sins of the parents or the sins of the person who suffers (Deut 20:5 and Deut 5:9). In this understanding, blindness suffered by the man is caused by sin, whether that sin is that of the parents or his own. Jesus answers that it is not his sin nor the sins of his parents that caused his blindness. Rather he was born blind *so that the work of God may be manifested in himself*. Jesus does not connect the blindness with the past of the blind man, but with the future in which he will experience God's work in him. "Jesus' answer shifts the emphasis from the cause of the man's blindness which was the focus of the disciples' question to its inherent possibility for God's purpose."[6] Blindness becomes an occasion to reveal God's work. It is not a theodicy. "It simply takes into consideration the fact of the man's blindness and indicates that God is able to use his condition to reveal his works."[7] Jesus will soon do God's work in the blind man. What he will do is to carry out the work of "the One who sent him". Jesus' statement in vv. 4-5 constitutes a hermeneutical key to the correct understanding of what is to follow. "This means that the healing of the man born blind is an integral part of the works of the Father which Jesus, his authentic envoy, accomplishes in the world and by means of which he brings light into the world."[8] In this hermeneutical key, the readers of the Gospel are invited to understand what will be narrated. At the end of the story, Jesus will show that it is not sin that causes blindness; rather, it is the blindness that causes sin. In the prologue of the Gospel, it was said that the light comes into the world. Jesus then reveals that He is the Light of the World (v. 5 cf. 1:3; 8:12) who will bring light to the world; including the one who has never seen light since birth. He gives light for those who live in darkness. The Light of the World gives sight to the one who has never seen.

Scene 2: Jesus heals the blind man's sight (6-7) b

Jesus made mud with saliva and spread it on the blind man's eyes, and then asked him to go and wash in the pool of Siloam. There is no verbal communication between Jesus and the blind man before the healing. The blind man does not ask to be healed as in other healing stories. What the blind man did is to obey what he had heard from Jesus: to go and to wash in the Siloam pool. The blind man obeyed Jesus' command without any hesitation or rejection. His obedience shows a trust in the one who commanded him. "Radical response to the word of Jesus is indicated by the use of four verbs: he went, he washed, and he came back seeing."[9] What he has in mind is not any signs performed by Jesus. He has only Jesus' words and he obeys Him. He, who is physically blind, is not spiritually blind. His eyes cannot see Jesus, but his ears

listen to His words and his conscience brings Him to obedience.

The narrator provides the information that Siloam means "sent one" which is, in fact, Jesus' way of speaking about himself when he refers to himself as the one whom the Father has sent (9:7; cf. 3:17, 34; 5:36). This information seems to indicate that it is not the contact with the water of Siloam that healed him, but it is the contact with Jesus himself.[10] His contact with the Sent One has healed him. This Sent One is the Living Water (7:37), the Light of the World (8:12) who gives life and light to everyone. He gives sight to the one who in his whole life hadn't seen light. After the healing, Jesus goes out from the scene and will only appear again in Act 3 when he will find the healed blind man driven out from among the Jews.

Act 2 Interrogations and Escalating Conflict (9:8-34)

Scene 1 : Questioning of the man by his neighbors (8-12)

The neighbors are questioning the identity of the healed man among themselves. Is he the blind beggar whom they knew before? Some of them say 'It is he' but others say 'No, but it is someone like him.' An affirmative answer comes from the healed man: "I am." Having received information about his identity, the neighbors continue to ask another question: "Then how were your eyes opened?" This question will be repeated again and again, and his answer is always the same (vv. 10, 15, 16, 19, 21, 26). This time, he can only say that the one who healed him is "the man called Jesus." But when he is asked about where Jesus is, he answers "I don't know." The man is unable to recognize that he has been given the light through the intervention of the Sent One of God. He only knows that people call him Jesus. He admits his ignorance about the place where Jesus is now.[11] Jesus has gone out from the scene after the healing, but "he is at the centre of the discussion, and continues to be the focus of attention in the unfolding narrative."[12]

Scene 2 : Questioning of the man by the Pharisees and the beginning of conflict (13-17)

In scene 1, the neighbors presented three questions to the healed blind man. The first two questions have been answered. The healed blind man has answered the question about his identity and about how he regained his sight. The last question about Jesus' whereabouts has no clear answer since the healed blind man said that he does not know. Why do the neighbors now bring him to the Pharisees? It could be that the healed man's ignorance about Jesus' whereabouts is considered unconvincing by the neighbors. But v. 14 gives information that the day on which Jesus healed the blind man was a Sabbath.[13]

Placed in the context of the Sabbath, the questioning by the Pharisees "is now firmly inserted in a specific institutional and juridical context."[14] The Pharisees raise a question about how he now sees. The healed blind man gives the same answer as before: "He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see." For some of

the Pharisees, Jesus transgressed the Sabbath law. A division emerges among the Pharisees about the origin of Jesus. One side says that Jesus cannot be *from God* because he does not observe the Sabbath. The other side says that Jesus cannot be a sinner because a sinner cannot perform the signs that Jesus did. The evangelist has informed the reader that what Jesus did is the work of the One who sent him. But those who are in the narrative do not have this information.

The division is not focused on the healed blind man, but on Jesus who has healed him. The Pharisees do not question the fact of how the blind man now sees. Rather they raise questions about Jesus' identity: Is he from God or is he a sinner? So there is a shift of the theme from the question about the healed blind man to the person who has healed him. The division happens because of the disagreement about who really is the one who has healed the blind man. Two ideas are contrasted: from God or a sinner. The basic assumption is that a sinner never comes from God. Jesus is regarded as a sinner because he does not observe the Sabbath. Jesus' healing work, however, does not permit anyone to think that Jesus is a sinner. Only the one with whom God is well pleased may do such work. Only because of God's power in him, Jesus is able to heal the blind born man. Unable to come to agreement about Jesus, the Pharisees then ask the healed blind man what he would say about his healer. He answers that Jesus is a prophet. To the neighbors he could only say that the one who has healed him is the man called Jesus. Now he steps forward in his knowledge of Jesus by saying that Jesus is a prophet. His answer manifests his belief that "Jesus is an extraordinary individual in whom God's power is at work."[15] He knows that in him Jesus has manifested God's power.

Scene 3 : Hostile interrogation of the man's parents by the Jews (18-23)

A new group is mentioned: "The Jews." There is no indication that these Jews are other than the Pharisees. These two attributes are used interchangeably. The second interrogation will show it. As the man progresses in his belief in Jesus (vv. 7, 11, 17), the Pharisees move in an opposite direction. The Jews do not believe not only the reality of the healing, but also in the fact of the blindness of the man. So they need information from his parents about his blindness. They give them two questions: "Is this your son, whom you say was born blind?" and "How then does he now see?"

The parents can only affirm the fact of his being born blind, and withdraw from the discussion about how he now sees. They answered that they do not know how he sees and who opened his eyes. Regarding these last two matters, the parents ask the Jews to directly investigate their son. Why do they not give answer about who had healed his son and how the healing happened? There is no information whether the parents were present when Jesus healed their son. From a viewpoint of juridical controversy, Asiedu-Peprah said that the parents have no enough information to bear witness about what they did not see directly.[16] Therefore, they ask the Jews to ask their son directly. The narrator, however, points out the specific reason why the parents

did not want to answer the question and instead ask the Pharisees to interrogate their son directly. They did not give answer because they were afraid of the Jews. The parents are not prepared to face a threat of being put out of the synagogue. This fear will stand in contrast with the courage of their son. They face the same danger, but demonstrate different choices. The parents' fear will be contrasted with the boldness of their son in acknowledging the fact that it is Jesus who has healed him. It remains to see how the son will behave.

Scene 4 : Hostile interrogation of the man by the Pharisees and rejection of him (24-34)

Having established the identity of the blind man from his parents, the Pharisees now interrogate the man. This scene constitutes the climax of the hostility. The Pharisees "know" that Jesus is a sinner. The healed blind man does not know whether or not Jesus is a sinner, but he is aware of the sign - that he was blind but now sees because of the work of Jesus. The Pharisees ask him to bear witness under an oath formula about what Jesus had done to him.[17] The healed blind man wonders why the Jews still ask him to tell them something that he had said clearly. They have heard his answer but now they question him again. Their question provokes another question from the healed blind man. They ask him again and again about what Jesus had done. They want to know about Jesus. Listening to the story of the deeds of Jesus is part of the process of becoming a disciple of Jesus, even though true discipleship demands more than faith in miracles. So do they also want to be his disciples? The healed blind man's question waits for a negative answer: "No, we don't want to." Giving emphasis on *kai humeis*, the healed man puts himself in another side against the Pharisees. He implicitly tells them that he is Jesus' disciple. The healed man is, in fact, not yet a disciple, but he can at best be described as a prospective disciple.[18]

This question changes the status of relations between the healed man and the Pharisees. Before this question, the healed blind man was part of the Jews. From him, the Pharisees needed a testimony to judge Jesus for breaking the Sabbath law. But now, the healed blind man puts himself against them by giving a favorable testimony to Jesus. He is now on Jesus' side. His boldness to say what he believes places him to stand out as a paradigm of what it is to be a disciple of Jesus.[19] He did not tell explicitly that he is Jesus' disciples, but the Pharisees understood his answer as a statement. They say "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses." Now the opposition between two sides becomes clearer: the disciple of Jesus against the disciples of Moses.

The polemic between them then goes in a different direction: from what Jesus has done to who Jesus is. The main idea in this polemic is about Jesus' origin is that he comes from God. The Pharisees are so oriented to the question of "what" that they fail to enter to the question of "who". They say that they do not know where Jesus comes from. That means that they do not know Jesus' true origin which is an important clue to know Jesus' identity. The healed blind man, on the other side, enters into the topic

of "who." He knows where Jesus comes from. He is firmly convinced, "If this man were not from God, he could do nothing". Asiedu-Peprah analyzes the conclusion taken by the healed blind man about what he knows about Jesus. "Since God has bestowed his divine power on Jesus as evidenced by the healing, Jesus must be a devout person who does God's will. He cannot be a sinner, namely, one who breaks the law. This is the healed man's response to the accusation that Jesus is a sinner."[20] The healed blind man's answer brings the attention back to the hermeneutical key at the beginning of the story. Jesus said that he works to complete the works of the One who sent him. The healed blind man knows this reality well. He knows his healer as the one who comes from God. The fact that he was healed from his blindness makes him know that God works through Jesus. Earlier, he only knew that the one who healed him was *the man called Jesus*. He knew that he is a *prophet*. In hostile circumstances, where he is under questioning from the Pharisees, he expresses his conviction that Jesus *comes from God*. The time will come when he will meet Jesus and will be given a revelation about Jesus' true identity. His belief in Jesus grows further, not because of christological ideas that he received, but because of what Jesus has done in him. Jesus has opened the eyes of a born blind man; and never before did a man do this work (cf. v. 32).

It is clear that the Pharisees cannot accept the healed blind man's confession that Jesus comes from God. In their opinion, he was born blind. That means that he was born in sin. Their opinion is the same opinion with that of Jesus' disciples at the beginning of the chapter. They cannot understand that the blindness is a way for God to reveal his works to the blind man and to those around him as well. The healed blind man knows this reality, while the Pharisees do not know it. Declaring that the healed blind man was born in sin, the Pharisees reject his confession. They drive him out from among them. The healed blind man was cast out from their midst.

Act 3 Illumination of the Man and Judgment of the Jews (9:35-41)

Scene 1 : The man is given 'sight' by Jesus (35-38) b'

The blind man was driven out from among the Jews. The reason for this expulsion is his conviction that Jesus who has given sight to him comes from God. Jesus left the scene after the healing, and now he appears again. Jesus is not uninformed about the man. At least he hears that the man was driven out from among the Jews. Now he is no more part of the Jews. He was excluded precisely because he chose to stay firm in his belief that Jesus comes from God; a belief that is rejected totally by the Jews who said that Jesus is a sinner. But when he is no more part of the Jews, Jesus finds him and only now there is a conversation between the healed blind man and Jesus. Now he comes face to face with the healer.

Jesus asks him, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" So far, the title "Son of Man" is not yet known by the healed blind man. He knows Jesus as a prophet, as one

who comes from God. His knowledge about Jesus as a prophet and one who comes from God is confirmed by Jesus' work in him. Regarding "Son of Man", however, he has no reference. Jesus is asking from him a commitment of faith in the Son of Man whom he himself does not yet know. He, who now is no longer physically blind, is still nevertheless spiritually blind. He still needs light from Jesus to know who the Son of Man is. And it is because he is blind that he looks for light. To the man who asked "Who is he?" Jesus reveals himself as the Son of Man, i.e., the one in whom God can be seen and heard in human history. Jesus' revelation invites the healed blind man to come to the final phase of his choice of faith. His choice is manifested clearly in his answer to Jesus. He answers him with a full confession of faith: "Lord, I believe." He moves from ignorance of his healer to a strong and assertive declaration of faith in Jesus.[21] Now the blind man is healed physically and spiritually as he sees the Light who has given him the sight.

Scene 2 : Jesus and the Pharisees: discussion about blindness and sin (39-41) a'

Jesus ironically confronts the Pharisees with their "blindness." The question about blindness at the beginning of the story now is answered. The Pharisees are sure about their non-blindness: "Surely we are not blind, are we?" But this is, in fact, their very blindness. Jesus says to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin." This contrary-to-fact conditional phrase means that they in fact are blind as they do sin. In them, it is not sin that causes blindness. Rather their blindness causes sin. It is the Pharisees who are blind and under judgment. They are in an opposite situation to the healed man. The blind man was still blind in that he did not know who the Son of Man is, and his blindness caused him to look for an answer that would be a light in him. The Pharisees feel that they are not blind so that they do not look for the light anymore. At the end of the story, the disciples' question is answered. Blindness causes sin and not the contrary.

3. A Disciple in John's Perspective

The Gospel of John is a story about Jesus' ministry in association with his followers. Jesus acknowledges his ministry as a manifestation of the work of his Father who sent him into the world. Jesus' story in the Gospel of John can be read at two levels: in the historical context of Jesus and his followers and in the context of Jesus' followers when the Gospel was written. Those who follow Jesus are commonly called 'disciples'. But it is difficult to point who are meant by disciples in the Gospel of John. The term 'disciples' refers to those who responded to Jesus in his historical ministry and at the same time also refers to those who believed in Jesus when the Gospel was written.[22] Discipleship is not limited in the experiences of the disciples of Jesus' ministry. It includes the experiences of Jesus' believers addressed by the evangelist. It can even be said that the main orientation of the evangelist is not directed at the disciples who were called apostles or the Twelve.[23] The main attention

of the evangelist is addressed to those who lived as Jesus' disciples when he wrote the Gospel. For them, the evangelist delivers Jesus' story.

To be a disciple of Jesus cannot be understood without belief in Jesus and in the One who sent him. In other words, discipleship does not exist without belief in Jesus. Melvyn R. Hillmer argued that in the Gospel of John, the verb "believe" characterizes the discipleship throughout.[24] A disciple is a person who believes in Jesus and through Jesus believes in the Father who sent him (3:16, 36; 5:24; 6:29; 12:44). "The discipleship, therefore, is dependent on believing in Jesus even though the disciples consistently fail to understand, reveal a remarkable lack of insight (4:33; 13:1-11, 37; 14:1-7; 16:18)."[25]

Jesus himself on several occasions expresses the characteristics of a disciple. In John 8:31 Jesus says, "If you ***abide in my word***, you are my disciple indeed." The discipleship in the viewpoint of the evangelist lies here. Openness to Jesus' words, a seriousness to hold on to his words constitutes the criteria of discipleship. A disciple is one who listens to Jesus and remains in his words. There is listening and obedience to Jesus' words. Radical response to Jesus' word is fundamental for a true disciple. With the above statement, "Jesus lays down exactly what it is that separates spurious faith from true faith, fickle disciples from genuine disciples."[26] So the first explicit characteristic of a true disciple given by Jesus himself is the perseverance in his word.

After washing his disciples' feet, Jesus explains the meaning of what he had done. At the end of his explanation, Jesus says, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you ***have love for one another***" (13:35). An indication that someone is Jesus' disciple is that he/she has love which enables him/her to bow down washing the feet of his/her brothers and sisters. A love which characterizes discipleship is, in fact, a love that Jesus himself has manifested in his love to them: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. *Just as I have loved you*, you also should love one another." A model of love for the disciples is the love of Jesus.

In John 15:8, Jesus says "My Father is glorified by this, that you ***bear much fruit*** and become my disciples." Jesus talks about the true vine and its branches. Every branch that does not remain in the vine will die. Every branch that remains in the vine will live and bears much fruit. That fruit is the unbreakable unity with Jesus and the Father. The unity with the Father and the Son gives fruit to eternal life for believers. In the Gospel of John, faith gives birth to testimony. Noticing the idea of discipleship in the Gospel of John, it seems that this testimony is the fruit of faith, the fruit of abiding in Jesus' words.

To be a disciple of Jesus in the Gospel of John has a parallel meaning with believing in Jesus. To be a disciple of Jesus means to believe in him. This expected belief is the belief in Jesus' words and in his person. This kind of belief is sometimes initiated by the signs performed by Jesus. But a disciple is called not to end his/her

journey with belief in Jesus' signs. Those signs were done by Jesus in his effort to manifest the works of the Father who sent him. Therefore, belief in Jesus includes knowing the Father and knowing Jesus who was sent by the Father. The process of discipleship does not come to an end by confessing that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. In the Gospel of John, that confession must become a testimony. A testimony of a disciple comes to reality in living together in love and service. This testimony is manifested also in courage to confess the faith in a hostile circumstance, to confess the faith under hard threats toward the faith and the believer. Every disciple of Jesus is requested to bear witness to what he/she believes in. This testimony is needed especially among the rejection to Jesus and to the faith in him. The Gospel of John was written to encourage Jesus' disciples to bear witness in front of threats challenging them.

R.F. Collins wrote that there are two common ways to understand the idea of discipleship in the Gospel of John.[27] The first way is through the study on the Beloved Disciple as a believer par excellence, the key understanding of discipleship in the Gospel of John. The second way is comparing the Gospel of John with the Synoptic Gospels in which the Twelve appear as a paradigm for discipleship. But as it was said above, the idea of discipleship in the Gospel of John is not limited to the idea about those who believed in Jesus in his historical ministry, but expands to those who become Jesus' disciples in the following generations. David R. Beck suggests that anonymous figures in the Gospel of John were presented by the evangelist as models of a disciple. Some anonymous characters in the Gospel of John occupy more textual space and demonstrate narrative significance by their faith response to Jesus' word, a response of witness to the efficacy of his word.[28] The fact that they bear no name helps the readers of the Gospel to identify more easily with them.[29] One of those anonymous figures in the Gospel of John is the blind man in John 9.

The story about the healed blind man in John 9, which is widely recognized as one of the masterpieces of Johannine storytelling,[30] does not, in fact, focus in a particular way on the theme of discipleship. But the elements of the idea on discipleship above appear clearly in this chapter. John 9 presents people (the blind man, the neighbors, the parents, the Pharisees/the Jews) who in different manners define their choices regarding Jesus. They see or hear about what Jesus did, but they make different choices. The blind man is firm in his belief in Jesus, while the Jews are firm in their unbelief in Jesus. The parents of the blind man are in doubt and demonstrate fearful choices. They know who has healed their son, but they are afraid to bear witness because of the Jews' threat to exclude Jews who confess that Jesus is the Messiah.

In brief, it can be said that the important elements in the discipleship are listening, confessing and bearing witness. The process of being a disciple who is not afraid to bear witness in the midst of danger appears to be an important characteristic of a disciple in the Johannine community which had to face a vivid conflict with the Jews. This conflict is pictured in the fear to confess Jesus as the Messiah because

whoever confesses that Jesus is the Messiah will be excluded from the Synagogue. The response of the parents in front of the Jews is an important piece of information about this situation. They know but are afraid to bear witness. In contrast with the choice of his parents, the blind man courageously expresses his attitude toward Jesus. In the blind man, the evangelist presents a model of a disciple that will be model for Jesus' followers who read the Gospel.

4. A Paradigm of Discipleship

When the polemic between the healed blind man and the Pharisees comes to its climax, he raises a question to them: "Do you also want to become his disciples?" It was never told before that he is one of Jesus' disciples. He never calls himself a disciple. But now he puts himself on Jesus' side against the Pharisees. His belief creates a demarcation line which separates him from those Jews who do not believe in Jesus. His answer changes his relations with his fellow Jews. Sandra M. Schneiders analyzes that throughout the gospel, people are distinguished by whether they know where Jesus comes from, where he is, and where he is going –namely, from, in, and to God- or whether they do not know either his origin or their own.[31] His choice to believe that Jesus comes from God is considered as a sign of his being disciple of Jesus. It is the Jews who for the first time say that the healed blind man is Jesus' disciple. They put in contrast their status as disciples of Moses and the healed blind man's status as Jesus' disciple. They know that God has spoken to Moses. On the other side, the healed man knows not only that God speaks to Jesus, but also that God has revealed his works through Jesus. He knows that the one who has healed him is God's worshiper, the one who is obedient to God's will. Only the one coming from God is able to give sight to the one born blind. His process of discipleship goes step by step in his effort to know Jesus up to the point that he acknowledges that Jesus comes from God. This process does not proceed easily since he has to put himself in opposition with his fellow Jews who consider Jesus a sinner.

The Jews cannot bear his boldness in confessing his belief in Jesus. In his person, the evangelist shows the characteristic of a true disciple. A true disciple listens to Jesus, has firm faith in him knowing that Jesus comes from God, and courageously confesses his faith to others, even if his confession brings about danger and risk in a hostile circumstance. The healed blind man shows this characteristic. In contrast with his parents who are afraid to tell what they know, the healed blind man bears witness without hesitation. Risk and danger do not kill his faith; rather bring it to its maturity. The greater the risk and danger are, the more courageously he confesses his belief. The confession of his belief in Jesus under hostile situation is a sufficient foundation to recognize him as Jesus' disciple. Without mentioning that he is Jesus' disciple, it is known that he really is. In the healed blind man, it is manifested what Jesus said: that the disciples are indeed his disciples if they abide in his word and bear much fruit. He abides in Jesus' word totally, without hesitation since the first

time he received Jesus' word. He bears much fruit of faith in confessing that Jesus is the one coming from God.

The process of discipleship of the healed blind man can be known if we pay more attention to his contact with the Sent One in John 9 step by step. His process begins with Jesus' word to go and wash in the pool of Siloam. He showed a radical response by following Jesus' command without hesitation. What he had in mind is obedience to Jesus' word. He did not yet even know who the man who commanded him to go and to wash was. He only knew that people called him Jesus. The narrator's information about the meaning of Siloam suggests a certain meaning in Jesus' command. The man is commanded to plunge himself in the Sent One, the title frequently used by Jesus to call himself. He will plunge himself in the Sent One and comes out seeing. When people want to know where Jesus is, he cannot give answer for he does not know. He was blind, but his physical blindness did not make him unable to understand Jesus' word to him. Physical blindness did not make him blind spiritually and close himself to Jesus' word. It does not mean that after the healing, he can see fully. At this point, the healed man experiences a transition from physical blindness to the physical ability to see. After he can see with his eyes, he still remains blind in terms of who has given him new sight. He does not know where his healer is. Discipleship is real in the healed man, in this point: in his choice to listen to Jesus' word, to believe in it, and finally to do his word without hesitation. He shows radical response which Jesus himself has requested from his disciples: "If you abide in my word, you are my disciple indeed".

A disciple is not only called to remain in Jesus word, but also to bear witness to Jesus. This characteristic of discipleship is in accordance with the Gospel's understanding of faith in Jesus. For John, faith is lived only together with the readiness to confess it publicly and to bear the consequences of such a confession in a hostile context.[32] The healed blind man's confession occurs in the context of the exclusion of those who believed in Christ from the synagogue (12:42, 9:22). He knows that Jesus comes from God. In the context of the Gospel of John, those who know where Jesus comes from know his true identity.[33] The healed blind man knows and bears witness to it. In this hostile circumstance, his task is to bear witness courageously to what he has experienced from God through Jesus, regardless of the consequences. The man born blind is a disciple who came into the world incapable of seeing but who, by being washed in the life-giving waters of the Sent One, is enlightened and enlivened by the divine light and life and is able to respond to questions by friends or challenges by enemies.[34] Through the example of the blind man, the Gospel appeals to all disciples of Jesus to allow themselves to be excommunicated, for Jesus will seek them out as he sought out the blind in v. 35 and bring them to complete faith.[35]

The climax of the process of discipleship in the healed blind man comes in his encounter with the Sent One. At the beginning he washed himself in the Pool of Siloam. Now he has the opportunity to enter into the depth of the Living Water,

the Light of the World who has given him sight. John 9 is full of questions since the beginning, but the most important question is Jesus' question to the healed blind man: "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" Answering the man's question about who he is, Jesus replies, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." Jesus' answer is surprising. The one who was born blind, who never saw anything now sees the Son of Man. He who has listened to Jesus' word, obeyed his word without hesitation, and courageously bore witness to him, now answers "I believe." He grows step by step in his understanding about Jesus: 'the man called Jesus' (v. 11), 'he is a prophet' (v. 17), 'a man from God' (v. 33) to the final confession "Lord, I believe" (v. 38). Discipleship in the healed blind man is a process to see when one is confronted with the Light. In this case, he is a model for every person who desires to be Jesus' disciple.

5. Conclusion

Jesus calls his disciples to remain in his word, to live in love for one another, and to bear much fruit. Everyone who wants to be Jesus' disciple cannot avoid this call. The process of discipleship goes along with the process to believe in Jesus. To be Jesus' disciple means to have faith in him. In the Gospel of John, one who has faith in Jesus must be a witness. In the midst of rejection towards faith in Jesus, every disciple is requested to keep his faith firm and to bear witness to Jesus.

Listening, confessing, and bearing witness are the characteristics of every disciple. The healed blind man in John 9 represents this picture of a disciple. He listens to Jesus since the first time he heard his word. He lives in obedience to his word. He bears witness to Jesus to those who reject him. His faith grows step by step as he knows who Jesus is. He is 'the one called Jesus', 'a prophet', 'one coming from God', and finally he believe that Jesus is the Son of Man. His faith is examined in the interrogation by the Jews. In him, faith is not a personal matter. Faith compels him to bear witness to Jesus. Readiness to confess the faith publicly and to bear any consequences of the confession is an integral part of discipleship.

The healed blind man becomes a model for everyone who desires to be Jesus' disciple. His choice to believe in Jesus and to bear witness is relevant not only for Jesus' followers when the Gospel was written. He is still a model for contemporary believers who live their faith in Jesus in a hostile circumstance, where the name of Jesus is rejected and the faith in Jesus is opposed. His anonymity facilitates contemporary disciples to identify themselves with him in listening to Jesus, remaining in his word, knowing Jesus and the Father who sent him, and finally bearing witness to Jesus.

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Endnotes

[1] Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John I-IX* (The Anchor Bible 29), 377.

[2] J.L. Martyn, *History and Theology,* 30; Robert A. Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, 73, 139; George Mlakuzhyil, *The Christocentric Literary Structure of the Fourth Gospel* (Analecta Biblica 117), 205.

[3] Mark W. G. Stibe, *John*, Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993, 106.

[4] Mark W. G. Stibe, *John*, Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993, 106.

[5] Dorothy A. Lee, *The Symbolic Narratives of the Fourth Gospel*. 165. This paper will follow this structure in analyzing the story of the healed blind man.

[6] Martin Asiedu-Peprah, *Johannine Sabbath Conflicts As Juridical Controversy*, 122.

[7] Martin Asiedu-Peprah, *Johannine Sabbath Conflicts As Juridical Controversy*, 122.

[8] Martin Asiedu-Peprah, *Johannine Sabbath Conflicts*, 124.

[9] Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, 292.

[10] Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, 292.

[11] As an important note, the question about where Jesus is (1:38-41), where he comes from (3:31-34; 7:28-29), and where he will go (8:21-22) are related to the question about Jesus' true identity. To know where Jesus comes from is to know *who* he is. To know where he dwells is to be *with* him. To know where he is going is to *follow* him. Now the blind man does not know where Jesus is, but at the end he will acknowledge that Jesus is from God.

[12] Martin Asiedu-Peprah, *Johannine Sabbath Conflicts,* 128.

[13] Martin Asiedu-Peprah is not convinced that the reason of the neighbors to bring him to the Pharisees is because Jesus does not observe the Sabbath (p.129). They bring him to the Pharisees because his ignorance about where Jesus is does not convince them about the truthfulness of his answer (p.128).

[14] Martin Asiedu-Peprah, *Johannine Sabbath Conflicts*, 129.

[15] Martin Asiedu-Peprah, *Johannine Sabbath Conflicts*, 134.

[16] Martin Asiedu-Peprah, *Johannine Sabbath Conflicts*, 135.

[17] "Give glory to God." This was an oath formula used before taking testimony of a confession of guilt (Josh 7:19; Esdras 9:8). Cf. R. E. Brown, *The Gospel*, 374.

[18] Cf. Martin Asiedu-Peprah, *Johannine Sabbath Conflicts*, 140

[19] J.L. Martyn, *History and Theology,* 20.

[20] Martin Asiedu-Peprah, *Johannine Sabbath Conflicts*, 144.

[21] Dorothy A. Lee, *The Symbolic Narrative,* 179.

[22] The evangelist is aware of the two groups of Jesus' followers. Jesus prays in John 17 for the disciples who are with him at the supper (vv. 9-19) and also for those who will believe in him because of the disciples' word (vv. 20-26). The epilogue of the Gospel is clearly directed not to the disciples who follow Jesus in his ministry, but to those who believe in him when the Gospel was written.

[23] There is no complete list of the disciples in the Fourth Gospel. This Gospel shows little interest in 'the Twelve', never refers to them as "apostles" in a technical sense. Melvyn R. Hilmer concludes that "what seems clear is that the author of the Fourth Gospel was concerned to identify specific followers or to refer to 'the disciples' generally, but not to give an important place to the Twelve as such." Melvyn R. Hillmer, "They Believe in Him: Discipleship in the Johannine Tradition" in *Patterns of Discipleship in the New Testament*, Richard N. Longenecker (ed), 80.

[24] Melvyn R. Hillmer, "They Believe in Him," 84.

[25] Melvyn R. Hillmer, "They Believe in Him," , 85.

[26] D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 348.

[27] R. F. Collins, *These Things Have Been Written*. 46.

[28] David R. Beck, *The Discipleship Paradigm*, 2.

[29] David R. Beck, *The Discipleship Paradigm*, 1.

[30] Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John* (Sacra Pagina vol 4), 290.

[31] Sandra M. Schneiders, "To See or Not to See. John 9 as a Synthesis of the Theology and Spirituality of Discipleship" in *Word, Theology, and Community in John*, John Painter, R. Allan Culpepper, Fernando F. Segovia (ed), 199.

[32] Johannes Beutler, S.J., "Faith and Confession, The Purpose of John", 21.

[33] R. Alan Culpepper, *The Gospel and Letters of John*, 178.

[34] Cf. Sandra M. Schneiders, "To See or Not to See," 195.

[35] R. E. Brown, *The Gospel*, 380.

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