

John 9:1-41

1 As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. 2 His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” 3 Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. 4 We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. 5 As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” 6 When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes, 7 saying to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. 8 The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, “Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?” 9 Some were saying, “It is he.” Others were saying, “No, but it is someone like him.” He kept saying, “I am the man.” 10 But they kept asking him, “Then how were your eyes opened?” 11 He answered, “The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, ‘Go to Siloam and wash.’ Then I went and washed and received my sight.” 12 They said to him, “Where is he?” He said, “I do not know.”

13 They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. 14 Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. 15 Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, “He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see.” 16 Some of the Pharisees said, “This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath.” But others said, “How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?” And they were divided. 17 So they said again to the blind man, “What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.” He said, “He is a prophet.”

9:18 The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight 19 and asked them, “Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?” 20 His parents answered, “We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; 21 but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.” 22 His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. 23 Therefore his parents said, “He is of age; ask him.”

9:24 So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, “Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner.” 25 He answered, “I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.” 26 They said to him, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?” 27 He answered them, “I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?” 28 Then they reviled him, saying, “You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. 29 We know that God has

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spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.” 30 The man answered, “Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. 31 We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. 32 Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. 33 If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.” 34 They answered him, “You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?” And they drove him out.

35 Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” 36 He answered, “And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.” 37 Jesus said to him, “You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.” 38 He said, “Lord, I believe.” And he worshiped him. 39 Jesus said, “I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.” 40 Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, “Surely we are not blind, are we?” 41 Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.

ARE WE BLIND?

Are we blind?

That’s the question the Pharisees asked Jesus. And I think that’s the question we should ask ourselves this morning. Are we blind?

Of course, I don’t mean that literally. I mean it figuratively. Where are our blind spots when it comes to the Christian faith? Could we be like the Pharisees in some way?

Could we be excluding people from worship that we really ought to include? Could we be missing an exciting story of healing and hope because we are hung up in our old way of doing things and thinking about things?

Are we blind? Surely not. Say it ain’t so Jesus!
But, of course it is so. We are blind.

Church history proves it. How many atrocities have been committed and how many wars have been fought in the name of Christ? Too many. There is often a disconnect between what we say we believe and what we actually do.

In my own life I sometimes get a glimpse of this conflict. Like the Apostle Paul I struggle with the fact that the things I want to do I don’t do ... and the things that I shouldn’t be doing are sometimes the very things that I do. Do any of you ever feel like that?

Apparently we too have some significant blind spots. And we are not alone. The church as a whole continues to struggle with many issues. Like the Pharisees of old we are stringent about picky little things and yet miss the miracles that are all around us.

I wonder how many blessings we have missed because we have been bound up and blinded by the rules and regulations of the church? I wonder how many blessings we have missed because we have been bound up and blinded by our own unwritten rules and regulations? “We’ve always done it that way” is a powerful and important confession of faith in many places including the church and so it was in Jesus’ day as well.

SABBATH RULES

In today’s lesson the Pharisees are bound and blinded by their rules about the Sabbath. Now the Sabbath is important. You’ll remember that one of the Ten Commandments was “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.”

But, what does it mean to keep the Sabbath holy?

The Pharisees thought it meant doing absolutely nothing at all. If someone did something that was considered work on the Sabbath, then they had committed a terrible sin.

For example, since Jesus healed the blind man by making a poultice out of mud and asking him to wash in the pool, Jesus was breaking the Sabbath. He was doing work, and that was not allowed.

In fact, the religious leaders of the day thought that it was unrighteous to do such a thing even when the result of Jesus’ action was a miraculous healing. Tradition trumped compassion. And so it is today. We are more interested in asking who sinned rather than asking who was saved.

But, what was it about the Sabbath that made it holy, that made it special? It was not that you were required to do nothing. It was that you were *allowed* to do nothing.

The Sabbath was a gift from God. The Sabbath was God’s way of saying that everyone needs some time off. Even God rested on the seventh day.

This was radical theology in the ancient world. There was no 40-hour workweek in the ancient world. There were no unions to protect the rights of workers in those days.

And so God in his great mercy created a time of rest and restoration. God created a holy space for his people that made life better. As Jesus once put it, “Men and women were not made for the Sabbath. The Sabbath was made for men and women.” (See Mark 2:27)

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But, the religious leaders took God's gift and turned it into a burden. And they were blind to what they were doing. They didn't see the need for compassion. They didn't understand why God had given them this wonderful commandment.

I think that we in the church often turn God's gifts into burdens. We turn a word of grace into an inflexible commandment. We turn opportunities for healing and hope into occasions for conflict and mistrust. We use theology as a club to control people instead of using it as means to heal and restore.

We truly are blind to God's work among us.

WHO SINNED?

Notice how many people are blind to the possibility of God's grace in our lesson for today. We see it first in how Jesus' own disciples reacted to the blind man by the side of the road. What did they say? Did they ask, "Jesus, is there something that we can do for this poor man?"

No, they asked, "Who sinned? Is this man in this horrible state because he sinned or because his parents sinned?" There is no compassion for this man; there is only a desire to explain why he has encountered such misfortune.

This kind of simplistic and unbiblical theology is not relegated to Jesus' time. People today sometimes respond to tragedy by assigning blame.

For example, when hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, a state senator from Alabama thought he knew what God was doing. He said that the hurricane hit where it hit because Mississippi and Louisiana had legalized gambling. God sent the hurricane to punish those states for their sin.

A Methodist preacher in Alabama, hearing the senator's theory of divine retribution replied, "Well, if the Lord was aiming for those casinos then the Lord needs to improve his aim. The hurricane took out eight casinos and nearly a hundred Methodist churches!"

Jesus does not agree with this senator's bad theology. Jesus said that there is not always a direct correlation between sin and the circumstances in a person's life. In this particular case the man's blindness was an opportunity to let the light of God's grace shine into the world.

And that's when Jesus spits, makes a mud pie and heals the man's blindness. You would think that everyone would be happy about that.

But, no one is happy. The miracle does not create rejoicing. It creates confusion and anger.

A MIRACLE THAT CAUSES TROUBLE

We see it first with those who knew the man when he was a blind beggar. Now that he can see they can't (or won't) recognize him. This man was defined by his disability.

What's a society to do with a blind man who is no longer blind? It upsets the order of things.

When I was working as a psychologist I learned that healing one person could sometimes cause significant problems for other people in the family. Typically, a member of the family is identified as the sick one. He or she is brought in for counseling and they begin to get better.

The family rejoices, right? Not always.

Sometimes the family needs one person to play the role of the sick one, the crazy one. When the designated scapegoat is no longer able to fill that need then the whole family begins to have psychological problems.

The mental illness of one person was really a symptom of a greater family problem.

This story is not just about the miraculous healing of a blind man. It is about how we often use the misfortunes and sickness of one person (or a group of persons) as a way of ordering our world.

Those lazy poor people, those foreigners, those (fill in the blank) they are the ones who are the sinners. They are the ones that are responsible for the sins of the world.

The disciples assumed that the blind man or his parents had done something wrong.

In the same way the healing befuddles those who remember the blind man as a beggar; an example of what sin can do in a person's life. They don't know how to react to the man now that he can see.

Just like the disciples, the people who knew this man when he was blind are facing a theological crisis.

How can a blind man, a man born in sin recover his sight?

THE EXPERTS DISAGREE

So, they bring the blind man to the religious authorities to see if they can figure it out. Instead of rejoicing in the miracle the Pharisees question the credentials of the healer.

And when that doesn't work the religious experts disagree among themselves, and then they question the credulity of the man who healed.

Who was this guy who healed you? How did he do it? Tell us again. They still don't like the answers so they bring in the parents and ask, "Is this really your son? Was he really born blind? How was he healed?"

The parents are not rejoicing at this healing either. They are afraid of being rejected by the religious authorities and their friends and neighbors. They say, "It's our son. He used to be blind. But, we have no idea how he was healed. Ask him. He's old enough to answer for himself."

And so the religious authorities quiz the man who has been healed about Jesus. Actually, they don't quiz him as much as they threaten him. They tell the formerly blind man, "Give glory to God. We know that this man is a sinner."

In other words, say that God healed you but don't give Jesus the credit.

THE BLIND MAN SEES

But, the blind man sees. He replies honestly, "Whether this man is a sinner or not I don't know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see." And in the end it is the power of this healing that defies all attempts to put Jesus in a negative light.

Yes, the healing may have been done on the Sabbath. Yes, most people believed that those who were tragically disabled had sinned in some terrible way. But, the blind man now sees, and that changes everything. The miracle of sight transcends the criticism.

The religious authorities try in vain to wrest some other story out of the man who was healed, but they can't do it. Finally, they resort to name-calling. They tell the poor man that he was steeped in sin at birth and that they are throwing him out of the synagogue. They don't want to listen to his story any more.

But, it doesn't make any difference what the religious officials say. The fact remains. He once was blind, but now he sees. And the next person he sees is Jesus.

Jesus hears about the fact that the blind man was thrown out of the synagogue, and so he comes to him. And he asks the once-blind man a question. "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" In other words, do you believe in the hope of the Messiah? Do you believe that the promise of God's salvation will be revealed by a man here on earth?

The once-blind man replies, "Who is he? Tell me so that I can believe." And that's when the man really sees. Jesus tells the once-blind man that he is looking at the Messiah. Jesus is the Messiah.

The once-blind man gets it. He not only calls Jesus Lord; he also worships him.

BLINDNESS TODAY

We, like the religious leaders of old, are much too eager to talk about the sins of other people. We think that our faith in God qualifies us to see sin and make judgments.

But, often we are examples of another statement that Jesus made. We are attempting to remove a splinter from our neighbor's eye when we have a log in our own eye.

This story is almost funny. These religious leaders are so wrapped up in their complex schemes of religiosity and yet they are blind to the miracle. Again and again in the Bible the same point is made. The religious leaders are blind leaders of the blind!

You may as well know. Many of you know already. This is a difficult time for our denomination.

For many years now we have had profound disagreements about many issues, and our way of dealing with these disagreements is to try and decide who sinned. We try to find scapegoats. Those liberals are the problem. Those conservatives are the ones who are causing the trouble.

We have become a church that is twisted by convoluted rules and legalistic rulings. (Does that sound like something you've heard this morning?)

And now there is a real threat of schism.

What can we do in a time like this? How can we learn to see the way forward when the road looks so dark and narrow?

EMBRACING OUR BLINDNESS

I think that today's lesson shines the light of God's word on a way forward. When we are in desperate need of healing, it does no good to focus on why other people are blind! We need to see!

What did Jesus say to those religious leaders who asked, "Surely we aren't blind are we?"

He said, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But, now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains."

Now what does that mean?

I think it means that we are more likely to act in a sinful way if we concentrate on the sins of others instead of our own sins. We are more likely to act in sinful ways if we think that we have all the answers.

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We have to embrace our blindness. We have to embrace the fact that we are on a faith journey. Like Abraham we are going that place that God will show us. But, only God knows the route that we will take.

And yet what may look like a sojourn in the desert may prove to be (in the final analysis) a trip through the Promised Land.

Martin Luther once said that we ought to confess our sin and throw a mantle of charity over the sins of others. I think that is good advice.

Lent is not a time to define sin and talk about the sins of others. Lent is a time to confess our own sin. Lent is a time to admit that we are indeed blind.

Yes, we are blind, but we have heard of a man who can make the blind see.

He is the same one who loved us enough to die for us. He is the same one who told his faithful disciples, "This is my body, broken for you. This is my blood shed for you."

When we remember that today, may the grace of God enable us to truly see.

Amen.