

New Testament Lesson—John 9:1-41

Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X4qZ2KSbdxI>

As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." 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, saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. 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?" Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him." He kept saying, "I am the man." But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" 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." They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know."

They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. 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." 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. 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."

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 and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" His parents answered, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; 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." 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. Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him."

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." He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" 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?" Then they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from." The man answered, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone

opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" And they drove him out.

Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" He answered, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him." Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." He said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped him. 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." Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, "Surely we are not blind, are we?" Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains.

I want you to help me out this morning, all right. Fill in the blank for me, please:

It's not what you said, it's... (how you said it)

Yes! Thank you. We've all heard this before, right? It's not what you said, it's how you said it. It's not what you said, it was the *way* you said it. In other words, I didn't appreciate your tone of voice.

In the same way, I think one of the lessons that comes out of our story from John this morning is... It's not what you see, it's how you see it. It's about *how* you're seeing.

Yes, it's not really about what's in front of you *per se*. It's about the way you perceive what's there. It's really about understanding.

To be honest, I think we're making a big mistake when we dwell too much on the sense of seeing here. Let's not be overly concerned with the physicality of sight. In fact, I think we do a disservice to the message of John's gospel if that's the extent of what matters to us.

Yes, of course, this is a miracle story. But if we water this down to a man's restored vision—if we reduce this to a story about functioning eyes—then we have sorely missed the mark, my friends.

The Jesus of John's gospel is concerned not so much about a man's ability to see as he is about our capacity to understand...our capacity to empathize...and to love a little bit more like God does.

This is about our responsibility to treat others—especially those whom society has pushed aside as unworthy—with a sense of dignity; the kind of dignity God has given to everyone. For everyone born reflects God's image regardless of their natural ability.

It's about validating the humanity of all peoples and witnessing Christ in need—noticing Christ in need—Christ in the faces of those we ignore or pretend don't exist.

That being said...How do we usually interpret our environment? And, more to the point, how do we relate to our neighbors in need? How do we understand their circumstances? How do we think about those with a much different lived experience than our own?

For starters, I think it's a good thing to admit that we all bring certain things to the table. That is to say, we all carry certain baggage and experiences that directly affect how we perceive what's around us.

So let me politely remind you that...you're biased! We're biased, my friends! It's just a fact of life. Now, some of those biases we know very well. Others we willfully ignore. Some we try to convince ourselves aren't really a part of us—aren't actually relevant to how we perceive the world.

And some live under the surface—unconscious—innate—so ingrained within us that they exist as a kind of reflex we don't have to think about. They're just there.

I'm going to be less polite now...If you think that you're somehow navigating this complex world without bias...If you think you're immune from it—that you think and perceive with one hundred percent objectivity all the time, then let's meet for coffee sometime this week. I'd relish the opportunity to learn from a superhuman.

And now, I'm afraid, I just have to be blunt with you. Each and every one of us operates with and through prejudices. We. Are. Prejudiced. In other words, all of us make pre-judgments whenever we enter a space or engage with other people. It's a part of being human.

Pre-judgments can keep us safe. They help us to categorize and interpret our environment with ease and efficiency.

And, they can also be destructive. They can do harm. They can worsen divisions and inflame stereotypes and stigmas. And they can (and often do) amplify the worst impulses of humanity—perpetuating unjust systems that rightfully invoke God's anger.

For me, personally, one of the most powerful things about all these spectacular miracle stories of the Bible isn't that they showcase something impossible. It's that they tend to reveal our own biases—even those we may be completely unaware of. And that's good news!

These stories expose us to those more unsavory parts of ourselves we wish didn't exist—not to shame us or rub our faces in it, but so we can face reality and work to overcome them and become better people—more compassionate, Christlike people. Isn't that good news?

And they don't stop there, either. These ancient stories are persistently relevant. They have the profound habit of directing our attention to the ways we keep harmful systems alive and running today—thriving in some cases.

They often show how we keep disadvantaged groups in their place—caught up in the cycle of poverty, addiction, or violence—on *that* side of town on *that* side of the tracks...right where they belong—far from our homeowners associations and gated communities.

And, thankfully, this miracle story is no different. The author of John holds up a mirror to us—to our society as a whole—and brings our prejudices to light. After all, in the presence of the Light of the World, nothing can remain hidden for long.

Jesus' disciples are quick to show their cards, here. Upon seeing the stranger on the side of the road, they ask: "*Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?*"

Their pre-judgment—their bias is pretty clear, right? "This dude must've been quite the sinner to end up like this. It's either this guy's own fault or his family's that he lives such a pitiful life." Perhaps you're thinking, well that's harsh! You'd be right...

But y'all, this wasn't an usual conclusion to reach in the first century by any means. This way of thinking was part of the common wisdom of the times.

But you want to know the most uncomfortable part of it all? We think this way today, too, my friends! So, before we start scoffing or thumbing our noses at the disciples—before we cast judgment on them, let's take a step back and consider how the same thing happens in 2023.

Imagine, for a moment, the flurry of thoughts running through our minds when we come across those who've fallen on hard times—those with HELP signs at intersections, someone huddled over a burning barrel under an overpass, the ragged man asking for a moment of our time as we rush past them on our way to dinner, a young mother struggling with addiction...

Far too often, sadly, this is when our prejudices get the better of us and run amuck. We vomit out unfair judgments on these poor folks.

We think: "How could someone let themselves go like that? How can anyone let their lives fall apart so terribly? I mean, no one can have *that* much bad luck. Some people just can't

make good choices for themselves. If only they'd decided to go this way—to do this—to get help sooner—to move there—to stop being friends with them—to stop loving that person..."

We think: "Hey, I didn't have a great childhood and look at me. I come from a broken home, too. We didn't have any money and I'm doing just fine. My parents did drugs, my parents died when I was young, and I *made* something of myself."

In other words...It's their own fault when it comes down to it. Their own choices brought them here. At the end of the day, you only have yourself to blame.

"Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus, how'd this guy get to be so bad, that he's begging on the street, that she's in a group home, that they can't get off pain killers, that they're robbing a liquor store?

Siblings in Christ: Our Lord's help is never conditional! We don't have to satisfy a certain amount of moral requirements before Jesus will come to our aid and advocate on our behalf. We don't have to check off a number of predetermined boxes for God to love us.

In fact, if your community is treating you like dirt, John's gospel teaches that Jesus is willing to get his hands dirty. Christ isn't afraid to jump down in the mud with us. He's eager to do so—to be at our side.

With that in mind, Christ's response to the disciples is quick and definitive. They're asking Jesus, "Who's to blame for this?" but that question is destructive at worst and irrelevant at best.

Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of [God] who sent me."

In other words, the most important question you can ask right now isn't, "Who can we blame?" but, "How can we help?"

In other words (says Jesus), Here's your opportunity to showcase God's grace. Here's your chance to demonstrate God's unfathomable love and mercy to someone in need. This is the moment to be light—to be a refreshing drink of water to a parched soul.

We can do something extraordinary here (says Christ)! We can bring good news—the news that there's nothing "broken" about this child of God in front of us. He's been taught there's something "defective" about him, but nothing could be further from the truth.

No, his blindness—his being created in a way unlike the majority brings great glory and joy to the One who created him. Yes, it's that very diversity within creation that makes it possible for all of us to learn something about God we couldn't know otherwise.

The differences among us point us to God's presence on the margins and to Christ's activity among the ostracized. The Church becomes stronger when everyone is encouraged and empowered to use their unique gifts.

The Church can more effectively be a source of transformation when those people the world once considered to be "broken" are treated as they're meant to be treated: as beloved, gifted, indispensable change agents that bear God's divine image.

Listen: those muddy eyes "see" in ways others just can't. That person's autism enables them to understand things about the world most of us don't. That child's sign language speaks truths the rest of us desperately need to hear.

Ain't nothing "wrong" or "broken" about any of them—as if the only "right" or "correct" or "natural" way of being in the world means having "typical" abilities.

I'm struck by a statement from the brilliant theologian, Juergen Moltmann. He writes this: "The handicapped are not our problem. We are theirs." The handicapped are not our

problem. We are theirs. Isn't it time the Church repented of that terrible bias—that the disabled community are somehow a “problem” the rest of us have to overcome?

Isn't it time that we, the Church, stopped treating accessibility like some chore—like a financial burden we just can't afford right now? If not, then perhaps we should consider taking a dip or two ourselves in the pool of Siloam.

I want to close this morning with another bias I believe far too many people of faith stubbornly hold on to. It's one we find in our story today—perhaps a more insidious one. It's that people don't change. Not really, at least—not at their core—not fundamentally.

You're given a deck of cards at birth and that's it. Haters gonna hate; sinners gonna sin. Once a cheat, always a cheat. Once a liar, always a liar, always a bully, always a user, always a bigot, always a doubter, a betrayer, a denier...

Siblings in Christ, nothing could be further from the truth. Of course, yes, we all have certain predispositions, but believing we're incapable of real change—real transformation—is one of the most un-Biblical claims I can think of.

The road to true repentance can be long and virtually endless. The same could be said of the road to healing and wholeness. It can be treacherous and meandering and full of relapses. We may have to wrestle with God all night to even get a glimpse of the hope that's possible. But make no mistake, that road is real. The Way is there for anyone and everyone to follow.

So in the future, when you come across these familiar healing stories, I'd encourage you to reconsider what's actually “miraculous” about it. Perhaps it's not really about what you're healed *from*, but what you're healed *to* that matters—healed, perhaps, to love, to forgive, to reconcile, to repent, to spread the good news.

And, you know, maybe even think twice about who's been “healed” in the story. Maybe it was those gathered, too. Maybe it was the disciples. Maybe it was us—healed to acknowledge and root out those harmful prejudices. God I hope it was us.

Maybe he wasn't “broken” after all. Maybe they never were. Maybe they're just “fearfully and wonderfully made”—born to shine like everyone else.

Amen.