

New Testament Lesson—John 9:1-41 (video portrayal)

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.

John's gospel often disagrees with the others on some of the minor details about Jesus's life and ministry. You see: John was the last of the four to be written. And, to be honest, John just "sees" things differently than Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

For example: The gospel of John claims Jesus's ministry lasted three years, while the others say his ministry was cut short after just one year.

Now, don't get me wrong. When it comes to what matters about Jesus, the gospel writers are on the same page. Preached about the Kingdom of God? Check! Died by crucifixion? Check! Risen on the third day? Check!

Does it matter whether Jesus's ministry lasted one or three years? Probably not...Not to me, anyway. But, if that's a "make-or-break" detail for you and your faith, feel free to connect with me later.

One area where (I think) the gospels are in total agreement is that Jesus performed miracles. To me, this is indisputable. According to the records we have, Jesus was a wonderworker. He used his power to do amazing things—impossible things—godly things.

It's worth noting, though, that for all the spectacular displays of power, most of these were done to help other people. In fact, the majority of Jesus's miracles are *healing* miracles—especially if you factor in his power over demonic forces.

In other words, Jesus isn't going around blowing people's minds just for show—just because he can! He's not trying to win the "Jerusalem Peace Prize" or get on the cover of *Biblical Times*. He's not walking on water and thinking, "Y'all: This is gonna look great in so many Renaissance paintings! Hope they're remembering my good side...How's my hair?"

I have to say that because there were, in fact, other miracle workers during this period who did think along those lines—people that were in it for the money, that were in it to get famous—to bring glory to themselves.

This is something that really makes Jesus unique in those days. His miracles aren't self-serving. They're always for the benefit of others—always done freely from a place of compassion and empathy.

Jesus doesn't even like to take credit for the healings he does in John's gospel! Instead, he's likely to say something like, "This was the power of God working through me. Give glory to God! Give thanks to the Father."

So, as you might expect, we hear something like that from Jesus in this story this morning. His disciples are still under the impression (which was common then) that a person's unfortunate circumstances must be due to their sins or the sins of their parents.

Now before you start scoffing...Look, that was just the way many people understood the world. Particularly, if you were born different in a way that would put you at a real disadvantage, then somebody close to you must've done something *really bad*.

And you know what? When you think about it, our ways of thinking about those in need around us aren't really much different. Sadly enough, we succumb to a similar temptation more often than we realize.

Remember, the man Jesus healed—the man born blind—was a beggar. We come across real people just like him all the time and we assume the worst about their choices. Right?

Oh, sweetheart, this is why you don't want to hang out on this side of town. See, honey, that's why you should surround yourself with people that make smart decisions. So sad, some people just don't know how to say "No" to drugs and alcohol. You know, I don't understand why they can't just get a job like the rest of us? Sound familiar?

But, as Jesus often does, he shows us how unfair our ways of thinking can be. He shows us how harmful what we think we know might be toward the most vulnerable in our midst. He shows how destructive our assumptions often are to the "least of these."

With that in mind...He responds to the disciples quickly—decisively: *Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.*

Already, with just a few words, Jesus disrupts the cycle of victim-blaming—a cycle that, to this day, refuses to acknowledge the historic, systemic structures at work. These systems perpetuate social inequities that make it harder for the less fortunate to get off the street.

You see: The Gospel of John, way more than Matthew, Mark, or Luke, puts Jesus and God on the same level. So I can easily imagine Jesus taking some offense at the suggestion that Israel's God unfairly punishes human beings with such cruelty.

On the contrary, the God of Israel is slow to anger and abounds in steadfast love.

The God of Israel consistently and predictably takes what the world considers to be discardable—worthy only of our pity—and transforms it into something that inspires and amplifies God's grace and mercy—something that teaches us how to love with greater sincerity.

To put it another way... The healings of Christ in Scripture are rarely (if ever) just about the person who's made well and restored. It's about the community. It's about those present for the miracle. It's about those who learn of it later. It's about Jesus's disciples then and now. And, yes, it's also about Jesus's opponents.

The healings of Christ, more than anything, are about prying open the hearts and minds of humanity to view everyone (no matter their circumstances) as beloved children of God, made in the image of their Creator and, *therefore*, deserving of dignity and respect.

Even the "least of these"—*especially* the "least of these" deserve the benefit of the doubt rather than our worst assumptions about how they ended up where they are.

You see: these signs of restoration are about what's possible when God is at work—when Christ is present and ministering through the hands and feet of the Church.

And you may recall that Christ really gets his hands involved in this story. I'll confess: as miracles go, this one might be the most gross. I mean, there had to be another way to get this done, right? Like, was the process here really necessary? Was there any phlegm in there?

Details we're spared, perhaps. The gospel writers, after all, provide only what they feel is necessary to help us believe. And in this case, we're told Jesus spits on the ground—at least enough to make some mud.

From there, he scoops it up in his hands and spreads it all over the blind man's eyes before instructing him to wash up. After doing what Jesus asks, he is transformed and remade. For the first time in his life, he's met a true prophet of God and, perhaps, understands his presence on earth with clarity and purpose.

He isn't just gifted with a new way of perceiving the world, he's given insight into the Way—the Way which leads to building a better world. He's gifted with a certain vision for the future—a vision that transcends human senses and a future far more meaningful than imagination allows.

Near the end of the story, after the poor man is twice interrogated, Jesus exposes the self-righteousness of the religious leaders. He reveals the profound sinfulness of those in power who refuse to change their minds despite all the evidence—despite the good-faith testimony.

It's quite possible that Jesus still has the "evidence" all over his hands at this point—caked with mud and grime... and hope.

Siblings in Christ: In these complicated and volatile times we find ourselves, I deeply wish the Church as a whole understood its presence on earth with as much clarity and purpose as the newly created disciple in this story.

I wish we knew the path forward with certainty and could act with appropriate boldness. To be honest, it sometimes feels like we're stumbling in an unknown direction—without vision.

Perhaps it's because we're just not following through with the basics of what God requires of us—not doing those small things that can lead to great things with practice.

And yet: We've encountered Christ, my friends. Christ has met us exactly where we are. Christ has acted—taken the initiative so that we might be sent out with transformative love.

But perhaps we're still walking around with the mud over our eyes—still yet to complete the first task Jesus gave us—yet to establish our foundation—yet to wash off who we used to be so that we can be who God desires us to be—who the world needs us to be.

I saw a wonderful quote over the weekend from a colleague in ministry. It feels worth sharing: “After close study, I’ve concluded that Jesus believed there are two kinds of people: 1) your neighbors, whom you are supposed to love; 2) and your enemies, whom you are supposed to love.”

The *ask* is clear. The “*how*”?...about as clear as mud. So let's start with the simple things first before jumping into the fray of a chaotic and dangerous world.

Start by knowing that you're loved—that you are seen in all your imperfection and complexity—that you are worth Jesus dropping everything to get his hands dirty.

Understand, also, that the same love applies to every single other person regardless of their beliefs, circumstances, or problematic relationship to the truth—despite their refusal to consider new facts and information. This is the good news of the gospel!

Because, friends...If we truly don't believe that every human being created in God's image is worthy of loving, how can we possibly build the bridges that are needed? How can we begin to repair the breaches that abound? How can we do the hard stuff?

If we haven't sincerely taken that essential truth to heart, then we are stumbling around with mud-covered eyes. We're obstructed by a wall that really isn't there.

First things first. Reinforce that foundation. Then, once you've washed that mud off your face, you'll start from a place of compassion. Then, the way will begin to show itself.

Then, God-willing, you'll get your hands dirty, too.

Amen.