

“Eyes That Can See and Eyes That Cannot”  
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury  
Psalm 23; John 9:1-41 (read in three sections)

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Our Gospel reading centers on the experience of an adult man who has been blind since birth. This has relegated him to begging in his culture, but also living with an underlying question of whether his inability to see was caused by his sin (conceivably in the womb) or his parents' sin. Forget that the Book of Job sought to set the record straight that Job's tragedies were not linked to his behavior, even Jesus' disciples have this cause and effect relationship between sin and disability on their minds as they pass the man born blind on the road. And while we may think we have outgrown such a theology, I would venture to say few of us have not offered the question in prayer, “God, what did I do to deserve this?”

Let us begin our reading in John 9, in three parts. The text is printed in the bulletin, and I would invite the congregation to read the parts in bold, so you will first be the disciples, then be the man's neighbors, and finally, his parents.

First Gospel Reading (dialogue)

John 9:1-12

*As Jesus walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked Jesus,  
DISCIPLES: “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”*

*Jesus: “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; light is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.”*

*When Jesus 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,*

*Jesus: “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam”*

*(Siloam means Sent). Then the man went and washed and came back able to see. The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask,*

*NEIGHBORS: “Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?”*

*FEMALE NEIGHBORS: “It is he.”*

*MALE NEIGHBORS: “No, but it is someone like him.”*

*The man born blind kept saying,*

*Man born blind: “I am the man.”*

*NEIGHBORS: “Then how were your eyes opened?”*

*Man born blind: “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.”*

*NEIGHBORS: “Where is he?”*

*Man born blind: “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 the man's eyes.*

The sighting of the man born blind has taken his community by storm. Some ask if this is the same man. One wonders if it could have been true then, as today, that even those who put a coin in the beggar's cup rarely look the person in the eye? So, they question him about his identity, and they ask the man about Jesus, "Where is he?"

Did they really ask that? Are they asking the man where he last saw Jesus? Because the last time he would have seen Jesus was when he was still blind.

Okay, let's forgive the neighbors for not putting two and two together, but now they decide to hand the man off to the Pharisees, and just to make things interesting, John inserts the fact that the healing has taken place on the Sabbath. We will hear the Pharisees are less concerned with the wonder of the sight the man received as they are the details of the mud Jesus used.

We know healing on the Sabbath was forbidden, but the Pharisees will also take note that Jesus mixed spittle and dirt to make a mud. Among the 39 categories of work forbidden on the Sabbath, was the kneading together of materials or ingredients. So it was not just the ban on Sabbath healing Jesus violated, but his making of mud pies.

Let us continue the story of the healing of the man born blind.

## Second Gospel Reading

John 9:13-21

*Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight.*

*Man born blind: "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."*

*Man born blind: "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,*

*PARENTS: "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."*

John wrote his Gospel in the late first century, after Rome had destroyed Jerusalem and the temple, and the Pharisees were the surviving Jewish leaders. Followers of Jesus were suspect, for they would be straining the fragile unity the Pharisees sought to maintain to keep Judaism alive. As in any culture, where there is a real or even perceived fear of reprisal for speaking one's beliefs, or standing against authority, the parents seem to want to play it safe when called to testify about their son. Perhaps they truly do not know how their son was healed, so they stick to just two facts – the man is their son, and he was born blind. Yet, as we continue our reading, John reveals their fear.

After receiving little from the parents, the Pharisees will recall the man born blind, and as biblical scholar, Frances Taylor Gench, writes, "in this final interrogation, [the man] comes into his own as an adept theologian and a sharp-witted interlocutor." [Gench, Frances Taylor, *Encounters With Jesus*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), p. 69]

We now conclude the account of the healing of the man born blind.

### Third Gospel Reading

John 9:22-41

*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 the Pharisees called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, "Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner."*

*Man born blind: "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?"*

*Man born blind: "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."*

*Man born blind: "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 the man, he said,*

*Jesus: "Do you believe in the Son of Man?"*

*Man born blind: "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him."*

*Jesus: "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he."*

*Man born blind: "Lord, I believe."*

*And he worshiped him. Jesus said,*

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

The disciples do not ask why the man was born blind – they assume they know – someone sinned. They simply ask Jesus who did it? Was it the man himself who sinned – presumably in the womb since he was born blind – or was he paying for the sins of his parents. Exodus 20 speaks of *visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the sons to the third and fourth generation of those that hate me*. I guess the mothers are off the hook, though the disciples seem to include both mom and dad in their question.

As I suggested at the beginning, while we seem to be past linking blindness at birth to sin, I think we still wrestle with the relationship between sickness and punishment in our life stories. If disease strikes a child, or tragedy occurs to good people; if we ourselves or one we love becomes ill with heart problems, cancer, disabling pain, or a progressive disease such as Parkinson's, there can be an underlying, even if unspoken question raised to God, "What have I done wrong?" Sometimes, we add, "...to deserve this?" In biblical terms it is a lament cried to God. It is also a cause and effect question, and as such, it parallels what the disciples ask Jesus.

Jesus' answer is immediate and direct. The disciples have asked an "either or" question – which one of two choices, the man or his parents? Jesus responds with a "neither nor" answer – your question itself is in error. He could add, "Have you not read the Book of Job lately?" The man's blindness was not caused by sin. Yet, it is what Jesus says next that always catches me by surprise and causes me discomfort.

Jesus tells the disciples, "...he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him." I find that hard to swallow. It smacks of a God who toys with human lives to glorify Godself. I can't imagine a God standing in heaven looking ahead and saying, "Well, my boy Jesus is going to be passing through this town about twenty years from now, so I am going to cause this particular child to be born blind, so that Jesus can heal him and I will be glorified."

Biblical writer Lamar Williamson guided me to hear Jesus' response a different way. He writes that Jesus changed the disciples' subject from that of result to possibility. [Williamson, Lamar, *Preaching the Gospel of John*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), p. 110] From the question of "what happened? – who sinned? – that resulted in this man's blindness," Jesus changes it to a teaching on "the possibility of what God can do with blindness, even if God did not cause it."

This possibility approach allows us, actually makes us, let go of our desire for cause and effect answers to disease, illness and tragedy; even to begin accepting them as parts of life – not welcome, and often painfully and angrily tragic, but nonetheless parts of this complex world and life which we share. This frees us from being stuck with our "why?" questions of God's actions, or contemplating what we have done to incite God's afflictions or what we might do to change God's mind.

I think Jesus is assuring his disciples, and us, God is not the cause of the man's blindness, particularly as a punishment from sin, but this man's healing will make known God's desire for the world: that there be an end to blindness, that all will be able to see. Of course, in the Gospel of John, we know "seeing" goes beyond having 20/20 vision in your eyes, though Jesus will make that clear with the Pharisees.

Still, when we have lived in the land of cause and effect, it is hard to move to the realm of possibility. To do so means giving up notions of being blessed for good behavior or inflicted for our sins. To make this move, it might work well to follow the journey of that man born blind on that Sabbath day.

Destined to a life of begging because of both disability and stigma, I expect there would have been a mix of both joy and confusion when Jesus gave him sight without him even requesting it. For his whole adult life, his identity would have been tied to his guide stick, now set aside, and his beggar's purse, no longer needed. His life has changed dramatically.

He calls Jesus a prophet, which we also heard last Sunday from the lips of the Samaritan woman at the well – a prophet: one who sees future possibilities in present situations and people. The man also declares his belief that Jesus is from God. The less than pleased Pharisees, who have obligated the man to tell the truth when they say, "Give glory to God," dismiss his story and throw him out of the synagogue. They want a firm indictment of Jesus, not a faith confession in him.

Symbolically and literally his being cast from the synagogue places him back before Jesus, who has sought out the man. His full confession then proceeds, "Lord, I believe you are the Son of Man." He now has allowed his life to be ushered into the realm of possibility. Still, possibility does not mean a guarantee from life's troubles.

The shepherd God of Psalm 23 seems to be one who can keep the sheep from all harm, but a pack of wolves intent on having a meal of lamb chops is going to have its way even if the sheep are guarded. It is not the promise of guaranteed protection, but guaranteed presence that guides the psalmist through the valley of the shadow of death and to a table set in the midst of enemies. "For Thou art with me..." Assured of the shepherd's presence, the psalmist can sit at a table in the presence of enemies, not maintain a safe distance.

Just so, when the world shows its blindness to the suffering of the poor, or closes its eyes to the casualties of war, we are called to walk into the dark valleys and toward the need. We are to be Jesus' fingers, mixing the healing blend of mud and spittle, even if it breaks the rules of Sabbath, even if we will upset the authorities. We are called to be disciples peering over Jesus' shoulder to hear of a man's experience and what he now sees that the Pharisees have not.

I think today, we tend to validate the experiences of people like us, when they fit within the rules, the guidelines, what we declare to be the acceptable norms of our culture and religion. Yet, when a person's experiences are beyond our own realm of reality, or go against the tradition of what religion has deemed sinful, we may play the role of the interrogating Pharisees, unwilling to trust the experience as real, and seeking to pinpoint sin.

As David Rensberger writes of this passage, "The blind man sets the one thing he is certain of, his own experience, against the standards with which the Pharisees confront him. ... The blind man's God does not live in a book, not even the book of the law itself, but in the act of mercy that has been done to him. He is not about to give up this act, or the freedom of his God to commit it, even for the sake of Moses... The blind man's understanding of who Jesus is emerges from his struggle with those who would invalidate the experience of his own life." [Rensberger, David, "Johannine Faith and Liberating Community", pp. 45-46; as found in Gench, *op. cit.*, p. 76]

There are many who have experiences we will never have, and which may seem foreign, alien, or even wrong to us. Whether it is the experience of divorce or mental illness, or those who have a different sexual or gender identity, or those who feel racism even from good people, or simply the experience of our own child's choice to work a trade or follow an artistic pursuit instead of a lucrative profession; when that experience does not match our own, we tend to ask questions that lead to condemnation. As such, we may stand with the Pharisees, blind to seeing God's amazing grace and mercy. What a loss, for us.