

John 9, retold

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Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

Fourth Sunday of Lent - March 19, 2023

Texts: Ephesians 5:8-14, John 9

Ephesians 5:8-14 (*paraphrased*)

Once you were darkness, but now in Christ you are light.

How can I walk as a child of the light?

The light shines in all that is good and right and true.

How will I know what is pleasing to God?

Don't be tempted by lies that hide in the dark, but expose them for what they are.

How can I avoid making myself judge over what other people do secretly?

When you shine the light of truth in the darkness, everything becomes clear.

**My Beloved God, please wake me up into the brightness of life,
so I may see the world in the light of Christ.**

John 9



Today's story from John is long and involved, but it also moves with great speed - so quickly we could easily miss a lot of it. But the story *is* the message so I'm going to slow it down and comment along the way. I hope you hear the humor as well as the frustration, and see the beauty as well as the blindness. Probably we'll still miss a lot. The Bible's like that. Everytime you read it, the Holy Spirit shows you something new and startling. This time, I invite you to pay particular attention to the questions!

Scene One: Clear as mud

As Jesus walked along, he saw a man blind from birth.

—Stop right there. What does it mean to see someone? Really see them? The person Jesus saw was not the same as his disciples saw. They didn't see a person, they saw an object lesson, an opportunity for a theological discussion.

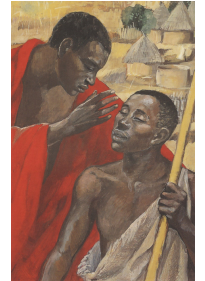
They asked him, 'Rabbi, *who sinned*, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?'

Even though they hung out with Jesus on a regular basis, they were still stuck in the common human assumption that any misfortune is the result of bad behavior.

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.'

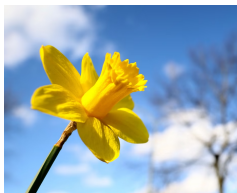
Jesus here reminds me of a professor who, when asked a simple question, launches into a review of the whole course. In fact, that's what he is doing: setting the stage for the rest of the story, raising the questions, What is sin? What is blindness? What is darkness? What is light? What is truth? What is the work of God? But Jesus doesn't only lecture about the works of God; he does them.

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, (Ummmm. Ewwww?) 'Go, wash in the pool of Siloam' (which means Sent). Then the man went and washed and came back able to see. Think about that. How did he feel? Disoriented? Ecstatic? Grateful? Reborn?



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.'



Imagine seeing a yellow flower silhouetted against a blue sky for the first time. Imagine seeing *anything at all* for the first time. Did his neighbors slap him on the back, congratulate him? No, they talked about him in the third person, as though he wasn't there. Then they kept pestering him. The whole thing is clear as mud to them. Maybe he's the only one who's seeing clearly!

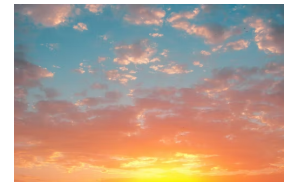
But had they ever really seen him? Honestly, do we really see people? A lovely woman named Katie, who also had been blind from birth, began attending a meeting I went to. She came with her seeing eye dog, a gorgeous German shepherd. The dog's name was Leila. One couple befriended Katie and often gave her rides. The odd thing was that when they mentioned Katie when she wasn't there, everyone said, "Who?" "You know," they'd say. "Leila's human." Oh, right. They saw the dog, not the person.



I confess I don't really see people who stand at intersections holding signs. Unless I stop for the red light just beside them *and* happen to have a dollar or two handy, I try to avoid looking at them. Mea culpa. I don't see them.

Scene Two: Not such private eyes

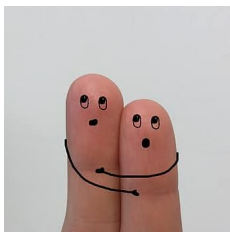
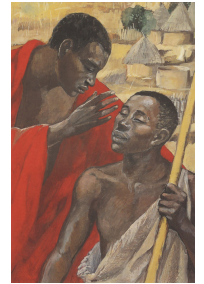
Not content to fight amongst themselves, the neighbors bring the man formerly known as "that blind beggar" to the religious authorities. All this man wants to do is walk around marveling at the beauty, but no, his sudden ability to see is now a matter of public contention. All eyes are on him.



To be fair, these authorities did have jurisdiction over religious matters. They legitimately settled disputes, they worked hard to maintain the integrity of their faith and keep people from assimilating with the Romans. And sadly, the negative treatment of Jews in the Gospel of John

has been used through the ages to justify anti-semitism, persecution, and genocide. It goes to show that just because we know our Bibles doesn't mean we see or grasp its truth. It's worth asking ourselves, am I using the Bible to justify my opinions, or to remove my own blindness?

Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. Then the authorities also began to pester him, asking, "**How it is that you can see?**" He said to them, 'He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see.' Some of the Pharisees said, "The man who did this 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 man formerly known as "that blind beggar," "**What do you say about him?**" It was your eyes he opened.' He said, 'He is a prophet.'



The religious authorities did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called his parents and asked them, '**Is he really your son? Was he really born blind? How come he can see all of a sudden?**' 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.'

The parents of the man formerly known as "that blind beggar" probably knew very well who had healed their son. They also knew that to admit that would be tantamount to saying they believed this man Jesus was the Messiah, which was forbidden. They knew they could be kicked out of the synagogue, ostracized in their community, beggared themselves. Can you blame them?

So for the second time they called the man formerly known as "that blind beggar," and they said to him, '**Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner.**'



Note, please. This is *not* a question. It's a statement of fact. They have apparently come to a verdict on Jesus and the verdict is: "Guilty." You know, it's one thing to have your authenticity questioned. I remember once when I preached in my home church.. A man came up to me afterwards, a man I'd known for some time, and said, "That was a good sermon. Did you write it yourself?" Ummm...thank you?

It's a lot worse when people have already made up their minds that you are guilty. In the book *The Violin Conspiracy*, a young musical genius, who happens to be Black, is driving a new rental car to a performance in a strange town. His violin, a Stradivarius, is on the seat beside him. Police stop him, pull him from the car, throw him to the ground, refuse to call the concert hall, impound his violin, and arrest him. He isn't even allowed a phone call. They have made up their minds. He's young, he's Black, he's male. He's guilty. He can't possibly be a famous violinist. That's fiction, but I've heard of similar miscarriages of justice reported by other Black classical musicians. It's incredibly demeaning. That's essentially how the man formerly known as "that blind beggar" hears them talking about the man who healed him. It changes him. The light has dawned for him; he sees with more than his eyes; he sees with his heart. Now they are the nonentities, the invisible ones; he is the truth teller. He's not afraid anymore.



He speaks up. ‘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 are so totally and entirely a sinner, you were born in sin, and are you trying to teach us?’ And they drove him out. Personally, I expect he couldn’t wait to leave.



Scene Three: Seeing one another

Jesus has clearly been tracking the situation as it unfolds. He hears that the man has been driven out and he looks for him. When he finds him, he says, ‘***Do you believe in the Son of Man?***’ The man who now sees answers, ‘And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.’ Jesus says to him, ‘You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.’ He says, ‘Lord, I believe.’ And he worships him. Jesus says, ‘I came into this world for discernment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.’ Some of the authorities 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 since you believe that you see, your sin remains.’

How *do* we see one another? As we’ve seen in this story, every point of view can also be a point of blindness. Do we see through the eyes of our own prejudice and fear, or through honest engagement? Do we see people for who they are rather than how they dress, what their Body Mass Index is, where they live, what candidate their lawn signs endorse? Or do we look deeper, to see what their reasons are for thinking and feeling as they do? Do we see with the eyes of love, the eyes of hate, or do we simply not see people at all? If we say we see, but we do not see with eyes of love, with the eyes of Christ, we are blind. But have no fear. Christ came so that those who do not see may see. May it be so. TBTG

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Prayers

Light of the world, let your truth scatter our darkness. Help us examine ourselves not with the prior assumption that we must be right, but that truth comes from you. May we never be so sure of ourselves that we stop asking questions.

May our prayers be honest seeking for your will, as we discuss what comes next for this congregation. May we look with new eyes at our community, this city of great healing but also of great inequities. May we be open to the person or persons who will be able to lead us forward.

We pray for leaders, who have power to reveal the truth; may they be inspired to do so. We pray also for courage among the small and insignificant people of the world, that when they tell the truth, they may be heard.

Our hearts are open and tender today for those who have suffered loss. We pray also for those who sometimes feel invisible to us: those who have isolated living situations, those anticipating or recovering from surgery, all who are distressed. Give all of them the comfort of your presence.

As we leave this place may we pray without ceasing that the light of Christ will lead us; even as we pray, Our Mother and Father in heaven....