

Seeing Sin and Other Stuff on John 9

John 9:1-41

You're in store for quite a Gospel reading. It's like TV's best medical dramas and courtroom or police shows rolled into one, with sitcom humor on the side. It's long, at 41 verses, but is chockfull. Rather than preaching on some part of it, I'm going to unpack pieces as we go, though that means you'll have to listen more carefully to keep the flow of the story amid my snippets of commercial interruptions.

The holy gospel according to John. (Glory to you, O Lord.)

As [Jesus] walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. ²His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

This is still a fairly common view, wondering when something bad happens, if it's punishment. Though we're Lutherans, we keep sliding toward a sense of karma. Far from an abstract theological question, that's dangerous. Jesus re-grounds us, though:

³Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. ⁴We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. ⁵As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world."

This chunk is a main reason I wanted to do this with disruptions. Almost every English version of the Bible gets it wrong. See, in the original, there were just strings of Greek capital letters all in a row, so as we translate the Bible, we make decisions and choices. Here a poor choice punctuates it breaking it as Karen read: "he was born blind* so that God's works might be revealed in him. [period] We must work the works of him who sent me." Check out the difference this makes: "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind. [period] But so that God's works might be revealed in him, we must work the works of him who sent me."

In the first version, even if it weren't a punishment for sin, still Jesus would have been saying God caused the illness for the sake of making a good example. That disturbingly still attributes suffering or exclusion or problems as God's will and purposes. (Again, still a fairly common view.)

But Jesus was dismissing cause-and-effect thinking about sickness or disability or such troubles. Though we know there are results for our misbehavior, Jesus was saying God doesn't cause sickness either because of sin or so that God can heal you. Some inexplicable and sad things just happen: this man was born blind.

But the question then becomes: what are we going to do about it? Jesus commissions us to join him: "we must work God's works," he says, to turn night back to day. Jesus is the light of the world, and as long as his work is being done he is

* (even more, the words "he was born blind" aren't in the original!)

enlightening and brightening lives that were in the valley of the shadow of death.

⁶*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...*

Does anybody have an association for what an image of God shaping dirt calls to mind? The Genesis creation story, forming life from the dust of the earth! Like with light in the darkness, this is a creation story.* A key of this story may be declaring that amid imperfections or what's not right in life, God the Creator continues striving toward perfection. God is not yet done working with you or our world.

⁷*[And Jesus said] to [the blind man], "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent).*

More fully, it means "the sent one." The name is a play on words. In this Gospel, Jesus is described over and over as sent by God; he's the sent one. But this also highlights the blind man is one sent by Jesus (and the Greek word here is "apostle").

Observe that in being sent, the blind man had to trust. He didn't know who Jesus was, nor had Jesus explained what's happening. The man had to find his way somehow through town to the pool, trusting Jesus. At which point Jesus disappears, from verse 7 all the way to verse 35. We'll return to what that might mean.

Then [the man] went and washed and came back able to see.

He can see! But what's hard for us to envision is that this isn't about miraculous healing of an illness as we think of it. Indeed, for John's Gospel these aren't called miracles, but are "signs" (v16), and as signs are pointers to Jesus and God's work, God's vision amid community. This man, though blind, would all-too-clearly have seen he was put on the margin of society, excluded from community. Without going too much into ancient optometry, he wasn't just stuck in the dark; darkness supposedly came from him. The view would've been that the blindness was because he was evil.** In some essential way, Jesus was showing he wasn't evil, which also restored him to a rightful place in community.

To understand this non-healing in our culture, it's exactly what we heard from Deshawn in adult ed, that systems need to change so that peoples' stories can be realized they are human from the day of their birth. To trace this, we can try a modern analogy on this "National Weekend of Prayer for Transgender Justice"*** and picture how those with certain gender expressions and identities have much too often been condemned and excluded. The man in the story was told something was wrong with him, that his body proved he wasn't right. His identity theoretically displaced him from normal society. He was fearful and his very existence was allegedly against the

* some good stuff here: <http://girardianlectionary.net/learn/alison-on-john-9/>

** stuff [around here](#)

*** <http://www.reconcilingworks.org/weekend-of-prayer-trans-justice/>

rules. But in this sign, Jesus showed that that place wasn't deserved and re-incorporated him into God's work as a disciple and apostle. Peeking ahead in the story, when leaders reverse justice and fail to see good, Jesus would stand against such blindness in society. He refuses to label the persecuted with sin. He welcomes hurting and oppressed people, bringing light in dark places and continuing God's creation that is seen as very good, even if it's a work in progress.

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."*

Another comedic bit. Some said, "are you the beggar?" Others said, "are you someone else?" He replied, "I AM!"^{*} He didn't choose one answer. He was both. (Or neither?) His identity wasn't the blind beggar anymore, even though it's still him.

This may be a spotlight on Jesus' work in your life, too. You're still the same old you, not waiting for a whole entire transformation when everything is different. And yet the confining ways you defined yourself or how constrictively others looked at you are no longer able to encapsulate you. You *are* also somebody new.

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.*

In a sad re-reversal, the man who was just freshly validated and reintegrated into life is once more excluded in this big section of courtroom drama and belligerent interrogation, though John subversively portrays it as proving guilt against those leaders. They said Jesus couldn't have the power to heal if he didn't care about the rules, but if he did have power from God he shouldn't have been breaking the rules. This shows their sense of justice is flawed. The sabbath was understood to be rest at the completion of creation, but we've already seen God recognizes there's still work to do. Their logic fails, just as it failed in saying the man must've been evil because he was blind, and as we're eventually discovering the real evil is in those who *could* see.

^{*} (another play on words with the divine name like Jesus!)

¹⁷So 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."
¹⁸The 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 ¹⁹and asked them,
"Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?"
²⁰His parents answered, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind;
²¹but 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."
²²His 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. ²³Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him."

I've been intrigued at how family plays into these Lenten readings. One week was ancestry, with the testament to you as descendants of Abraham and Sarah, but also of being born of Mother God. Last week involved marriage and partners, with a woman who'd been married to five men and was living with another, but Jesus gave her a new role separate from any condescending definitions. In this chunk, these parents didn't seem to care about their son's disability and needs, or to celebrate his new status, or to defend and guard him at all. They looked out for their own necks. Just as the reading is showing brokenness in social community, it seems the same in parent/child relationships. Finally, next week we'll hear about two sisters who loved their brother but were utterly incapable of helping him in the face of death but Jesus—who also loved him—was able. I don't know exactly what to make of all of this, but they're intriguing reflections on family and faith.

²⁴So for the second time [the religious leaders] called the man who had been blind,
and they said to him, "Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner."
²⁵He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know,
that though I was blind, now I see."

"I once was lost, but now am found; was blind, but now I see!"

²⁶They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?"
²⁷[The man] 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?"

Sarcasm alert! Probably they didn't want to be Jesus' disciples.

²⁸Then they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses.
²⁹We know that God has spoken to Moses,
but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from."

In spite of being an outsider in the position of weakness, the man was winning the

argument, which showed that so-called justice in society and those who control it were wrong in God's perspective. In this last portion, the religious leaders blew it. They'd essentially put Jesus on trial to disqualify his potential, but then admitted they didn't know where he came from. After repeatedly saying he didn't know what to say about Jesus, this is an opening for the man to reply that they should be able to recognize he must have come from God.

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 that if people are devout and obey God's will, God hears them.*

³²*Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. ³³If 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.*

That's the end of the debate. Since they couldn't win, they stifled his voice and kicked him out. This is too often the case in confronting authorities lacking justice or integrity: good and reasonable arguments are ignored anyway. Just as this began by refusing to explain illness or wrong—maybe frustratingly for many of you—it ends as a story not about improving health care systems or resolving political struggles or changing the minds of those in power, though such details would've been helpful for us these days.

Instead, this story focuses on when leaders don't follow the apparent right path and won't listen to reason. It's for people who have been left out in sickness, and left out even if they recover, for people who are told their very identity is faulty, is bad. It's one denied justice still being proven right and showing injustice in the system.

In all of that, it's portraying Jesus on the side of life, welcoming the outcast. It's about expecting that from him even when you can't see him, and not blindly putting trust in the wrong place like authorities or justice or even health. That's a hard thing when the struggle continues, when those in power drive you out, when you wonder if everybody is against you, including God. But it is in these moments that Jesus again shows up for you.

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."*

"You have seen him" here means that literally. This is the first time the formerly blind man has seen Jesus. It also has meaning for us, though we act now not by sight but by faith and in trust. As we gain confidence from our faith, we expect seeing Jesus mainly is still yet to come. We'll encounter that theme again after Easter when the

risen Jesus appears to help Thomas trust and believe, while reminding the rest of us, “blessed are those who have not seen but come to believe.”

³⁸*[The man] 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." ⁴⁰Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, "Surely we are not blind, are we?" ⁴¹Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains."*

That’s all of chapter 9 of John’s Gospel, though the story continues in chapter 10 with Jesus as the Good Shepherd, where seeing Jesus is rephrased as recognizing his voice. It remains focused on his identity of bringing us out of sin to abundant life in the beloved community of creation. I’d say that’s why we’re here.

For the Word of God in scripture, for the Word of God within us, for the Word of God among us, (thanks be to God.)