

4th Sunday of Lent
John 9: 1-41

April 3rd, 2011
"Healing and community"

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A Man Born Blind Receives Sight

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 neighbours 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 worshipped him. Jesus said, 'I came into this world for judgement 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.



This is certainly a long dramatic reading for a gospel story. It is great to have it portrayed that way, much better than one voice reading 41 verses. So thank you to all who participated.

When you hear a drama like that it is always interesting to ask – “Who do you identify with? – the Pharisees, the blind man, Jesus, maybe the parents. I suppose to some extent we can identify with several of them. And likely we all can think of

somebody else who should identify with somebody, especially the Pharisees.

So what is this long and involved story all about – other than being one possible source for the old drinking toast – “Here’s mud in your eye.” I did the research, there are other possible sources for that toast as well.

So we start with a man born blind, sitting by the side of a street in or near old Jerusalem. Right at the start Jesus challenges us. The ancient beliefs are in the question of the disciples – “Who sinned, the man or his parents?” Jesus is clear – neither. This has nothing to do with sin, and that is the real problem with the belief system underlying their question. The man is not just blind, he is also condemned and excluded. Someone must have sinned for this to happen. Today, of course, we are a little more sophisticated in our beliefs about suffering, but sometimes not much. Sin eventually will lead to suffering, but suffering is not always caused by sin. There is a randomness to life, witness earthquakes and tsunamis, and there are those who are the undeserving victims of unjust actions. Yet we are still prone to blame others for misfortunes beyond their control; and even when we don’t blame, we exclude them or let them drift away from the community.

So in the healing stories of the Gospels – the blind, the lepers, the demoniac, we see people who are not just restored physically and mentally, they are also restored to

community; they are healed. And in the process, the divisions within the community are also healed.

In most gospel miracle stories there is a familiar flow – a request for help, intervention by Jesus, healing, and then some form of action or consequence by the person or persons healed. And often Jesus tells the healed person – “Your faith has made you well”.

But in this story the man does not request help. Jesus intervenes on his own and uses mud made with his own saliva. And then tells the man to wash in the pool of Siloam. The man must act, if he does not wash in the pool, then what? But he does and is restored to sight.

This story reminds me of a great movie from the early nineties called *Philadelphia*, with Tom Hanks and Denzel Washington. If you haven't seen it you might check it out. It is inspired by the true story of a gay lawyer in Philadelphia, in the mid eighties, played by Hanks, who is a senior partner in a very prestigious law firm. He develops AIDS and is subsequently fired from his job. He sues for wrongful dismissal but can't find a lawyer to take his case so starts to do it himself. A homophobic lawyer, played by Washington, after witnessing some of the discrimination Hanks receives, takes the case out of a sense of justice. The man continues to deteriorate and collapses in the court room near the end of the trial. He wins his case but dies shortly after. In fact he says – “It's OK now, I can die now.” The story is about healing. It is not about curing, there is no cure. He dies. But it is about healing. It is about the rejection and marginalizing of people with AIDS, and the eventual restoration of this man to his rightful place in the legal community and among his friends and family.

But what about the man in John's story? Not yet. John's is a long drama, with many elements. So back to the movie. We are not told much in the movie about how popular the homophobic lawyer was with his colleagues in the legal profession for taking on the case of a homosexual with AIDS suing a major law firm. We can guess. But it doesn't matter, because he was healed too. The movie ends with the lawyer sitting in the home of his deceased client's parents, watching old home movies with the man's friends and family. His sense of justice overcame his homophobia and he is a changed man. He may be ostracized in some quarters but he is accepted into a whole new community of people who welcome rather than judge, who heal rather than condemn. And that community is healed, and brought together in grief and celebration.

John also shows us that other side of the story. For the Pharisees, the question is not one of a healing miracle, but one of authority and judgement. They question the man, then his parents, then the man again, and in the end they still condemn this poor man. They tell him – “You were born entirely in sin.” and they reject him once again from their community, even though he has been healed. But then he encounters Jesus again and is welcomed into the community of followers of Jesus.

I believe this part of the story has profound importance for the author of John and for the Christians of that time and place. How so?

Since Sinai, the Jewish people had maintained a covenantal relationship with the one true God, the God of Abraham and Moses. Note the words of the Pharisees, we are followers of the prophet Moses, but we don't know who this guy is. Prior to the death and resurrection of Jesus, there was only one way for a gentile to become one of the people of God, and that was to become a Jew. But all that has changed.

Including for Paul, who has seen the resurrected Jesus. He has new insight, not sight, but insight. He says – “It was like scales had fallen from my eyes” In Romans, Paul asks the rhetorical question – “Has God, through Jesus, overturned or scrapped the covenant with the Jews?” “Absolutely not.” says Paul. Paul insists over and over again that through the faith and obedience, the death and resurrection, of Jesus, both gentiles and Jews have now been welcomed into the people of God, just as they are.

For many Jewish-Christians that remained a difficult question – how Jewish does a gentile have to become to be a full member of the people of the God of Abraham and Moses. It is a question that split the early church between conservatives, moderates and radicals, which may seem like a familiar story in the midst of this election campaign. Paul was definitely a radical, and argued stridently against those he called the Judaizers. Unfortunately, much of the anti-semitism of later Christianity developed out of the misreading of the intent of Paul's arguments, as well as the conflicts reflected in the gospels. He was arguing for a Christ who embodied the inclusion of gentiles, not the exclusion of Jews. And while the Christian church, under the leadership of Peter and James, the brother of Jesus, welcomed gentiles, it led to real conflict with non-Christian Judaism.

The reference to the “Jews” excommunicating people from the synagogues has special significance. There is no evidence to support the claim that Jesus or his followers were barred from the temple or synagogues during Jesus lifetime, and considerable evidence, within the New Testament itself, that they weren't. But, by the time of the writing of this gospel, which is after the Roman destruction of the temple, serious conflict had developed between post-temple Judaism, led by the Pharisees, and the Christians. This reference is one of the clues used by scholars to date the writing of the gospel.

And I certainly do not mean to suggest that all Christians are kind and non-judgmental and Jews are not. My classmates and I shared a wonderful experience with a female Jewish rabbi in a synagogue earlier this week, and all semester, I have been working with a rabbi who is chaplain at a Jewish seniors' home where I have been doing a practicum in pastoral care. We all should know better than that. But John is written at a time when all of Judaism was in upheaval, with great conflict and tension. There were numerous factions setting up their tents and defending them fiercely, and only two survived – Christianity and Pharisaic Judaism.

So there is a clear message to the Christian community hidden in this reference, and it has interesting implications for you and me. For the man given sight, speaking truth means being rejected by authority, being excluded from the predominant culture of his

time and place. But it also means being welcomed into a new fellowship, the community of Jesus and those who follow him. So this was a subtle but powerful way of delivering an important message to the Jewish Christians in the time and place of the writing of this gospel. Do not be afraid of persecution. Do not be afraid to speak the truth. Jesus is the light of the world. He gives sight to those in darkness, both gentile and Jew. He releases the weak and the marginalized from the stigma of sin, and invites them into his fellowship.

So it is with the man healed by Jesus. We can hardly imagine life for his parents with the constant insinuation – “What sins did you commit that your blind son is being punished for?” Jesus opens the door for them to a new community too, but we are left to wonder if they ever entered it, because they clearly were afraid of being rejected even further by the one they were already part of.

This is a part of this passage that I expect has been neglected for a long time. After all, in the era of Christendom, who in our society was excluded for being Christian. But we live in a different world now.

Before I finish I want to touch briefly on the last few verses, which are quite enigmatic. The final words of Jesus, like most of John, are open to various interpretations. The rabbi told us in their tradition every verse has 70 interpretations. One is – if you have been shown the light and choose not to see it, then you are in sin. If you have not been shown the light you are not in sin. But if you have and deny it, what hope is left for you.

When preparing a text, I always like to look at the Greek. According to the Greek Interlinear Bible, the word we translate as sin literally means “*miss*”. The opening verses in Greek are “Who *missed*” him or his parents. The last line says because, literally – “you say you are looking then the ‘*missing*’ of yours remains.”

I like that. It takes some of the moralizing judgement out of it. But be clear, If you have been shown the glory of God, if you have been healed, if you have seen the injustice around you, the brokenness around you, then speak the truth, without fear of losing your place, for there is a greater fellowship, a blessed community, that is open to for you.

So then I would ask you – what is our “*missing*” in the Pacific North-West at the start of the 21st century? If our eyes are open, if we have sight, what is the truth we are to be speaking?

A more immediate and personal question is – why is our church in decline? Who sinned, who missed, us or our parents? Which generation is to blame? What if the answer is – no one sinned, but this is an opportunity for the glory of God to be revealed in the healing of broken community. When we dare to stand in the presence of this gospel, the story of the healing power of the One we call our Saviour and Lord, can we see clearly, do we have insight, not sight – insight, to see the opportunities for the in-breaking of a fresh new wind of the Holy Spirit, calling us to new community? I believe we can. Yes we can. Amen.