

Rev. Eric Dillenbeck
John 9: 1-41
"Di-Vision"
Sunday, March 19, 2023 – Lent 4A
Rocky River Presbyterian Church

Gospel Lesson

John 9:1-41

¹As 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?" 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 The One 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." ⁶When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, ⁷saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. ⁸The 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?" ⁹Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him." He kept saying, "I am the man." ¹⁰But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" ¹¹He 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."** ¹⁶Some 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. 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." ²⁴**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."** ²⁵**He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see."** ²⁶They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" ²⁷He 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?" 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." ³⁰The man answered, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. ³¹We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will.

³²Never 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.” ³⁴They answered him, “You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?” And they drove him out. ³⁵Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when Jesus found him, he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” ³⁶He answered, “And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.” ³⁷Jesus said to him, “You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.” ³⁸He said, “Lord, I believe.” And he worshiped him. ³⁹Jesus 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.

Friends, this is the Word of the Lord

Thanks be to God

“Di-Vision”

After my first year in college, I went home to Charleston for the summer so I could work and earn money for school. One day I was at the Piggly Wiggly when I noticed someone staring at me. He was very obviously a Citadel Cadet - he had the standard issue crew cut and was decked out in the blue uniform. At the time, the Citadel was an all-male military school that was very strict and rough on its freshmen. None of my friends even thought about going to the Citadel. But this guy was acting like he knew me. I looked at him again and thought he looked familiar, but I had no idea who he was so I did the “smile and nod” and kept moving.

Then he called out my name and laughed. At first, I panicked because I really had no idea who this guy was, but then his voice registered with my memory, and I could not believe it.

It was Brian Ball - a friend from elementary school. We had grown apart in middle and high school. He started hanging around with the skaters and looked the part. He had long hair down to the middle of his back, wore the ripped skater T-shirts and you could not separate him from his skateboard.

But now he looked totally different - I never would have recognized him.

Brian's experience at the Citadel transformed him and he laughed as he told me that my reaction was pretty common for him – none of his old friends recognized him anymore.

The same can be said for the blind man in today's passage from the Gospel of John. He lived in the world – but as a blind man he was forced to live on its margins - eking out an existence by begging for alms from those who believed his situation was caused by God's anger for his sinfulness. I doubt he was surprised when he heard the group draw near him on the street.

To this blind man, I bet these strangers sounded like a every other group of men eager to learn from their rabbi. He wasn't prepared for what happened next.

The blind man didn't seek out Jesus, the disciples initiated the interaction between them.

“Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” We think it is awful for them to think and say something like that, but this was a common assumption for centuries.

Jesus does not entertain that line of thinking – reframing the Blind Man's situation as an opportunity for God's work to be made known through him.

Then Jesus lives out every 9-year-old boy's dream – he spits in the dirt and makes mud which he then wipes on the blind man's eyes. This man did not ask for this – he never said a word to

Jesus. One minute he was just sitting there and the next he has mud in his eyes. All the blind man knows is that this man who was called a “Rabbi” by the group with him has wiped mud made with his own spit on his eyes.

If we stopped reading right there at verse 6 we would be able to predict what was going to happen. On this end of the story, we know who Jesus is...but this blind man had never seen Jesus – he does not know Jesus – he has no context for what is about to happen. Jesus doesn’t say, “hey, I’m the Son of God, my spit mud is going to heal you. All Jesus said was, “Go, wash yourself in the pool of Siloam.” Though he was blind, this man could see that something was different about him, could hear the authority and invitation in Jesus’ voice. So, he makes his way that pool and comes back to his community able to see.

Like my friend Brian, when this man returns no one recognizes him. *Isn’t this the guy who used to sit and beg? - I think so? Maybe? I think that’s him...* When he is healed, not one person said, “Thank God!” No one asked him what it was like to see for the first time in his life, or whether the light hurt his eyes. They focused on “How?” and “Who?” and “Where?”¹ When they could not make sense of this amazing thing that had happened, they brought this man to the Pharisees. It is clear from the start of the encounter with the Pharisees, that they are looking for reasons to discredit him and this transformation that has happened. They go so far as to call the formerly blind man’s parents to confirm his identity.

I am going to pause for a brief second here and address some of the language in verses 18-23. The text says, *“The Jews did not believe that he had been blind”* and makes several other negative references to “The Jews.” Jews – for generations the phrasing in this section of scripture and others like it have been used by antisemites to cast all Jewish people in a negative light.

It is important for the context of this story to understand that when the author says “Jews” it is really referring to those who are in power – to the Pharisees – to anyone who gets to dictate norms and customs and laws. It is not about the Jewish people, but rather about those who cling too tightly to power. In this story, the people with all the power are challenged by this man’s sight – it challenges their platform as the judges of right and wrong.

As afraid as they were, this man’s parents affirm that he was, indeed, born blind. I imagine the tension was palpable as the Pharisees were trying to figure out what to do. They turn their attention back to the man who had been blind. *“Walk us through it again. What did this sinful man do to heal you?”*

Barbara Brown Taylor says, “He does not know what to believe about what has happened to him. All he knows is that it has happened, and while everyone around him wants to know whether it is right or wrong (sinful or not), those are not the things that concern him at the

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor – [Home by Another Way](#) – “A Tale of Two Heretics”

moment. What concerns him is that he was blind and now he's not. If his inquisitors are going to insist that blind is right and not blind is wrong, then he will gladly consent to being wrong. When he is first questioned about his sight, he was giving timid, simple one liners, but as the questions go on and on, as he sees his own family circle the wagons and protect themselves leaving him alone again, he grows somehow more confident - finally answering the Pharisees so sharply that they expel him from the congregation.

I bet everyone could hear a pin drop in that moment," Taylor says, "when he says that, everyone in the room stops breathing. A nobody from nowhere who was blind until about 45 minutes ago has just told the board of elders that they could not see God if God bit them on the nose. They do not let the insult go unreturned, either. They rise to their full height in front of him, look down their unbitten noses into his furious new eyes, and say, you were born entirely in sin, and you are trying to teach us? And they drive him out of their presence and out of the congregation."

Once again, He is alone and cut off from his community. This is when Jesus returns. When Jesus returns, it is helpful to remember he has no idea who he is when he walks up. He has never SEEN him before. It would have been easy for the man to become defensive when Jesus walks up asking him if he believes in the Son of Man. – He has been through a lot; it would have been easy to imagine him wanting to curse this stranger for continuing the mocking and questioning. But Jesus does not keep him waiting, he says, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he."

Those I know who have sight issues have confirmed that their hearing is sensitive – they remember voices, they can hear and recognize tones.

I wonder if in that moment, this man, who is still learning to trust his sight, hears Jesus for who he is, hears the authority and invitation once again, and like the sheep in the field, he recognizes his shepherd – in that moment his senses align and he proclaims, "Lord, I believe."

This story is about way more than physical healing – it is about wholeness, it is about relationship – **Jesus heals so that the people can be made whole – so they can enter fully into relationship with others and live in community.**

This story is also about those who are challenged by God's activity in the world – about those who are challenged by God's graceFULL habit of drawing the circle wider, God's work of including more and more people in the covenant, God's trust in God's Chosen People to share God's blessings.

We want to view ourselves as the blind man who can now see Jesus which is incredibly wonderful.

But we are also invited to pay attention to those who are challenged by new vision, who instead of embracing Jesus' work of including a blind man in God's grace, create DI-VISION – drawing boundaries to keep people out so they can continue to control God's narrative. There is power in controlling God's narrative – in standing as the moral authority about who is acceptable in The Lord's sight.

“According to John, these are the people to watch out for, because they think they can see better than everyone else – and they are not shy about telling everyone else that you are not seeing what you think you are seeing. And sometimes that what you are seeing is wrong.”

What John is pointing out here is that these folks, these power brokers, are so set on maintaining their power that they are literally blind to the work of God in the world – blind to who Jesus is and how Jesus is working to draw God’s circle of grace wider – how Jesus is getting muddy in order to include more and more people in the embrace of God’s love.

I am sure we can all name folks in the world today who are acting like the pharisees. May we be as bold as the formerly blind man to embrace the wideness of God’s grace at work in the world and in our lives and allow that grace to be reflected through our eyes, hands and words this day and every day so that all people might experience wholeness and belonging.

Amen