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John 9: 1-41

“Jesus’ Work: Where is God”

On first read, the story of the blind man is a story that attempts to link suffering and sin. “Jesus,” the disciples ask when they encounter a blind man, “who sinned? This man or his parents?” In other words, who is to blame here? It’s wasn’t an unusual question in the 1st century. Everyone assumed there was a causal link between suffering and sin.

It’s not an unusual question to ask for 21st century enlightened Christians like us. Who did it, parents ask children when something’s gone wrong. What happened, we ask when a marriage splits up. What did I do to deserve this, we ask ourselves. When something goes wrong, we figure someone or something is to blame.

Yet, Jesus tells the disciples that neither the man nor his parents sinned; instead he was born blind so that God’s works may be revealed in him. Of course, that answer raises even more questions: did God want the man to be blind? Did God cause the man’s blindness, just so God could use him as an example? Was this a part of God’s plan?

They’re all great questions, and Lord knows plenty of ink has been spilled trying to answer them. I’ve preached on the subject of evil, suffering and God a few times myself. And it was my first instinct to do just that today. It’s the approach I’ve taken with this story the previous two times I’ve preached on it. And it’s not a bad approach to take, but I don’t think it’s the approach John had in mind when he penned this story.

You see, John’s not interested in philosophical questions about why the man is blind. John’s not even interested in the miracle that brought sight to the blind man. But What John is interested in is what that miracle points to: and that is God at work in Jesus Christ. If you want to know where God is, look no further than Jesus Christ.

Because there, in the person of Jesus, is God in the flesh. It’s as simple and as difficult as that. It’s how John begins his Gospel: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. And the word became flesh and dwelt among us.” According to John, if you want to find God, look for Jesus. It’s as simple and as difficult as that.

John then spends the rest of his book telling stories that support just that claim: that Jesus is God in the flesh.

What’s striking about these stories is that many of them only occur in John. And they’re about fascinating and interesting people, and we’re meeting many of them of during Lent. Two weeks ago, we met Nicodemus, a Jewish leader who was so embarrassed about his curiosity regarding Jesus that he only dared to approach him at night, when he couldn’t

get caught. Last week we met the woman at the well, who's been married almost as many times as Elizabeth Taylor and then goes on to become one of Jesus' best witnesses. Next week we'll meet Mary, Martha and Lazarus, a dead man brought back to life. Today, we meet a man whose sight is restored even though he never asked to be healed. It's just one of many miracles John includes in his Gospel.

Now, John likes miracles . . . a lot. But John doesn't call them miracles, he calls them signs. It's a subtle but very important difference. Because miracles usually beg for an explanation ("How did it happen?" we ask.). But a sign is something that points to something else. I mean, think about it: the point of a sign isn't the sign itself; the point of a sign is to get us somewhere or tell us something

Now, for the most part, we do OK with signs. They tell us what we're looking for or where we need to go, which is good. If you've ever gotten lost due to bad signage or lack of signage, you know how important signs are. Street signs, building signs, route signs, Interstate signs and bypass signs, get us where we want to go.

But sometimes, we don't do so well with signs. We either miss them, or ignore them. Sometimes, when I'm driving along and listening to the radio, I miss a sign. When we were driving to Chicago 2 weeks ago, I was the one responsible for navigating our way to the hotel. But I was so consumed with my iPhone and its map app (I love watching the blue dot that's us drive down the road), I missed the sign. My co-captain wasn't happy.

So sometimes, we miss the sign or ignore the sign.

And that's where we run into trouble. It's where the people in today's story ran into trouble, **and it's where we run into trouble in life.** They were so focused on how the man was healed, that they missed why he was healed: which was to see God at work in Jesus Christ. John invites all of us into this story so that we, also, can see God at work in Jesus. But will we see that? Or will we get too caught up in other issues? This story invites us to examine the state of our own vision.

First, we have the neighbors. Is this the blind guy who used to sit and beg, they ask? Some say yes, others say no. The man says, "Hey, it's me." How'd you get your sight, they ask? This man named Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, told me to go and wash them, and now I can see, the blind man says.

Now, I don't know about you, but I find the neighbors' reaction troubling. Because here they've lived with this man all their lives, but they can't recognize him after he's healed. It makes me wonder, is the only thing they ever saw in him his disability?

Which raises a question for us, doesn't it? Do we pay so little attention to the destitute that we scarcely recognize them? And do we speak about them rather than with them concerning their circumstances?

But the neighbors also make me wonder: Can we see past differences we have with other people? Are we able to look beyond our differences to see the humanity in people who are different than us? I'm not sure we can always look past our differences, you know? I think sometimes our sight is limited, and we remain blind to other people. We look past them, even when the sign says "Look." So John invites us into the story through the neighbors' lens and ask ourselves, how's our vision here?

The neighbors bring the man to the Pharisees, who do ask him how he can now see. "He put mud on my eyes, then I washed, now I see," he tells them. The Pharisees, interestingly enough, do not react to the man, but to the man who healed him. Some immediately claim Jesus can't be God because he healed on the Sabbath; after all, God wouldn't break a rule, right? Others say Jesus is a sinner because he healed on the Sabbath. So they ask the blind man, "What do you say about him?" He's a prophet, he tells them. Notice he's moved his level of understanding Jesus up a notch. He's not just a man now, but a prophet.

Now, we could blast the Pharisees for being themselves, but I'm going to be generous and say that they were asking the man questions out of genuine curiosity. The thought of healing someone on the Sabbath is so far afield for them, they can't even imagine how something like this could happen, so they're asking honest questions. Who do you say he is, they ask the man? The Pharisees are sincere, learned, religious people; sort of like some Presbyterians I know.

They're also engaged in a conversation with the man, unlike his neighbors. At least they're willing to have a dialogue, right? It may be a baby step, but at least it's a step forward, which is more than we can say of the neighbors. At least they're looking. So John invites us into the story through the Pharisees' lens and ask ourselves, how's our vision here?

Next up, we have the parents of the blind man. The Pharisees think the blind man is playing a trick on them, that he was never blind in the first place, so they ask his parents. "Was he born blind or not." Yes, he's our son and yes, he was born blind, but we don't know how he got his sight. Ask him. He can speak for himself.

The reason his parents said this was because they were afraid. They knew if they told the truth about who healed their son, they would be kicked out of the synagogue, because anyone who confessed Jesus as the Word made flesh was a heretic. And getting kicked out of the synagogue was a really big deal. It meant they would lose their friends, their community, their identity, and their livelihood.

But, one would think that a child receiving sight would be cause for great celebration. But fear is a big motivator. It was then and it is today. Granted, Christians in the US don't have to fear for their livelihood like they do in other parts of the world. But on the other hand, if we never find ourselves at odds at all with the powerful and/or the status quo, then there's something wrong. Sometimes we need to find the courage to speak out and to speak up. Like the parents, do we know more about the work of God in Jesus than

we're willing to let on, especially when it might mean putting our reputations at risk? So John invites us into the story through the parents' lens and ask ourselves, how's our vision here?

Now, the man is back in the hands of the Pharisees, explaining to them yet again what happened. "I've told you already," he said. "You're not listening. Why do you want to hear it again?" And then, the best question of all, "Do you want to become his disciple, too?"

Well, that's too much for the Pharisees. Um, no thanks, they say. So they kick him out of the synagogue. They kick him out because he's a sinner in their eyes for calling himself a disciple of Jesus. So now the man has come full circle, he's back on the outside. What his parents feared for themselves has now happened to their son. The Pharisees are so confident about what they know for certain, that they can't recognize the validity of someone else's religious experience. They totally dismiss his experience as invalid because it doesn't look like their own. Which makes me wonder, do we do this?

Just because someone else has a holy moment with mud doesn't mean the rest of us aren't scraping it off our shoes, right? But it should give us pause, especially when we're so certain of what we know. So John invites us into the story through the Pharisees' lens and ask ourselves, how's our vision here?

When Jesus hears the man was kicked out of the synagogue, he goes to find him. "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" Jesus asks him. "Who is he sir, tell me so that I may believe in him." And just like he did with the woman at the well we met last week, Jesus said to the man, "He is the one speaking with you. I am he."

And do you know what that man said? After all the hardship he's suffered over getting his sight back? Shunned by his neighbors and parents, kicked out of the synagogue, lost his community, livelihood, and identity? Do you know what he says to Jesus? "Lord, I believe." And he worshipped him. He didn't say, "I didn't ask for this! Give me my old life back." He said, "Lord, I believe." I once was blind, but now I see.

How's your vision? What is God calling you to see? Or who is God calling you to see? Like the neighbors, is God calling you to see beyond your differences with someone else? Like the parents, is God calling you to see past your fear? Or, like the Pharisees, is God calling you to scrape the mud off your eyes long enough to believe?

In Robert Fulghum's book "All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten," he reminds us one important thing we learned in kindergarten: "remember the Dick-and-Jane books and the first word you learned - the biggest word of all - LOOK."

Look. John wants us to look beyond the sign to Jesus Christ himself, because there we will see God, the very one who illumines our life and gives it meaning and purpose, changing the way we see ourselves and the world.

Look around you. See other people. Look beyond your differences to see the humanity in the other. Look beyond your fear to see humanity in the other. Look beyond your need to be right to see the humanity the other. LOOK. It is the biggest word of all. LOOK.

As the old hymn says,

*Open my eyes that I may see, glimpses of truth though hast for me,
Place in my hands the wonderful key,
That shall unclasp and set me free.*

Amen.

Sources:

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