

Sermon March 22, 2020

John 9:1-41, selected verses

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Part I

Today is a little different.

I'm breaking up the sermon
into two, let's say mini sermons,
at two different times.

This is the second Sunday
of long stories in John.

Last week we heard about the conversation
between Jesus and the Samaritan woman
at the well.

And this week is John's story
of Jesus and the blind beggar.

So, because this story is also quite long,
we aren't going to read all of it.

But since most of you are at home
more than you normally are
—it is an entertaining story,
best read aloud with lots of expression.

So, go ahead and write that
into your color-coded schedules
for this afternoon.

Not only am I preaching
two mini sermons,

I also want to start in the middle of the story,
which seems like an odd place to start,
but I promise there is a good reason.

So, to set the story up,

Jesus and his disciples happen up a blind beggar,
and Jesus heals the man.

Because of the miracle of giving sight to the blind,
no one seems to understand
how it took place
or believe the miraculous thing Jesus did.

So, when the blind man
who can now see,
is taken to the synagogue,
the leaders think maybe
this isn't who they thought—
maybe this isn't the man who was born blind:

Let us pray...**Holy Spirit**...Listen now, for a word from the Lord:

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.”

²²**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.**

...²⁴So 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 [Jesus] is a sinner.” ²
⁵The man 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 [blind] 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.

This is the word of the Lord,
thanks be to God.

Broadly speaking,
this is a story about those who see
and those who are blind.
But “if we’re listening carefully,
we dare not point a finger at the Pharisees,
or the disciples,
or [any] Christians
who differ from us down the street,”¹
because we would be
like those who remain blind.
Now here’s why we started
in the middle of this story.

At this point of the story
we learn that the blind man
gets kicked out of his synagogue.
He’s pushed out of his faith community
for his testimony about what Jesus does
because of who Jesus is.
The story tells us the leaders drove him out.
This was a real consequence
because even the blind man’s parents
are fearful of being kicked out
as the story says
that anyone who confessed Jesus as the Messiah
would be put out of the synagogue.

Now, here is why
we started in the middle of the story.
Most scholars believe this story
to be the “historical experience
of the community to which
the Gospel of John is addressed.
That is, John's community
may very well have been expelled
from the synagogue
for confessing Jesus as the Messiah

¹ <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/3/17/now-i-see-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-lent-4>

and *this narrative*
tells *their* powerful story.”²

Which means it is a story
not only sight and blindness
but also, a story of isolation;
a story of feeling lost
and uncertain.

Is it providential that we are reading a story
about isolation from the community,
at this moment?

I don't have to ask you,
leading questions from the text like,
when was a time you felt isolated?
I'm preaching to an all-but empty Fellowship Hall!

Isolation—distance from each other
and our faith community—
is something we deeply feel right now.

I want you to know that your church staff,
the session, and our faith community
are working on hard on creative ways
to keep us from feeling fearful and isolated.
As Whit mentioned in his Friday morning 20/40 devotion,
we are called to use our imaginations
to serve each other
especially in a time like this.

I loved, loved, loved all the pictures
and postings of all us eating
our dinners on Wednesday night
since we couldn't be together
for our Wednesday Night Supper.

Maybe this week
Tripp and I will let the girls eat two desserts first
since that's usually what happens at WNS.
I hope you are using

² David Lose <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1583>

creative and imaginative ways
to feel connected while we are apart from each other.
The marvel of technology
can serve us well at a time like this.

But I also know
we are all feeling stressed and taxed.
We are exhausted by the uncertainty
and the constant barrage of new facts.
I know how sad we all are,
about not being able to be together,
to sing songs together,
to hear scripture read together;
to eat Donut Life Kari Fisher's cookies together

...

we feel isolation now
like we probably have never known.
And we are only a little over
a week or so into this.

So please hear this and believe
—we are in this together.

You are not alone.
Reach out to us,
so that we can reach out to you.
The difference in our story and John's
is that the church isn't driving us out
for our witness
to God's work in Jesus Christ.

But almost everyone, everywhere
is feeling isolated and hopeless,
and the call is now
for the church to care for each other
and the world in new ways.
We need new eyes and new sight
for the challenge of being Christ's disciples today.

This early Christian community,
John's small church of Jesus followers,

experienced heartbreaking isolation.
But in spite of that,
the community was given a whole new way
of seeing God and seeing what God was up to in Jesus.
We are just as called to this new adventure
of seeing what God could be up to,
with our lives and our moments
right here, right now.
So church, we can do this,
we can do this,
we can do this.

Part II

Now for the second mini sermon
let's start at the beginning
of the scripture lesson:

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?"
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."
⁶When he had said this,
he spat on the ground

and made mud with 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.

**"Neither this man nor his parents sinned;
he was born blind so that
God's works might be revealed in him."**

I think it is important to point out
—especially at this time—
that the opening question in this passage
is whether an illness
was the result of sin.
Jesus's resounding answer is, no.

Friends hear that clearly
if there was any doubt in your heart.
I know there are scriptures
that say otherwise on this point
—that sins of the parents come
as consequences to the children.

And sometimes it does feel as though
the universe operates
in this kind of cause and effect way.
But Jesus is saying that
it is in this cause and effect way that allows
God's goodness to continue to shine forth.

Mark Davis is a pastor whose blog,
Left Behind and Loving It,
drew me in to these first verses.
Davis writes weekly
on the Greek translation of the gospel text,

meaning he has kept his biblical Greek
razor sharp.

In fact, and this is just a fun fact

—John Richards Hay,

who was the pastor at this church, from 1927-1952?

read his Greek New Testament

and translated passages weekly.

I know this because

I went to seminary with his great, great, nephew

who told me this

as we slogged through a summer

of learning biblical Greek.

Just a fun fact for you.

Whit and I do not do this.

Ha.

But back to Mark Davis,

who does and thankfully

blogs about it.

Anyway, Davis writes that the sentence,

“Neither this man nor his parents sinned;

he was born blind

so that so God’s works

might be revealed in him”

is a tricky sentence in the original Greek.

As a result, translators often add

a, “*so that*” to smooth the passage out:

he was born blind so that...

Well when that is done,

the structure of the sentence

makes the man’s blindness the subject.

Mark Davis writes that shouldn’t be the subject.

The punctuation,

which isn’t original to the Greek,

could be misplaced.

Reworking the structure
the subject changes.

Instead Davis proposes
we read Jesus's answer like this:

“Neither this man nor his parents sinned.
But in order that the works of God
may be made apparent in him,
it is necessary for us
to work the works of the one having sent me
while it is day.
Night comes
when nobody is able to work.”³

That, you see, shifts the subject
from the man's blindness
to what God is able to do
in spite of what is apparent.
Which I think is a faithful response
to a cause and effect mindset.

Many of us have been asking that question
—why is this happening?
And because of the virus
many of us have had to change our routines.
We have had to restructure our days.
Many of us are home with our children
or scrambling to find family and neighbors
to watch them while we are at work.

Many of us
who are used to dinner at El Paso,
brunch at Café Rule
breakfast at the Arcade
are now either are ordering take out

³ Mark Davis, Left Behind and Loving It, <https://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/> The Blind Accusing the Blind; March 15, 2020

or trying to rediscover
the many uses of our crock pots.
Many of us are missing
our favorite spin classes, aren't we?
We are used to having family and friends
over for playdates and meals
and now we are spending
much more of our time alone.

So perhaps this passage helps us,
as much as we are able,
to faithfully shift the subject.

Instead of all the things we grieve,
and there are days ahead
to still grieve yet,

maybe we can change the subject
to what God is able to teach us,
what we are able to learn
from all that is changing right now.

So, I'll offer you something
someone else wrote that might help us,
just like the disciples,
to (again) see things differently;
to see God's ability
to work out goodness in a new way:

This comes from Gurpreet Gill:
Gill writes,

And, what if...
If we subscribe
to the philosophy that life
is always working out for us,
that there is an intelligence
far greater than humans at work...
That all is interconnected.

What if...
[this is a time] ... To reset.

To remember.
What is truly important.

Reconnecting with family and community.

Reducing travel
so that the environment,
the skies, the air,
our lungs all get a break.

Parts of China are seeing blue sky and clouds
for the first time in forever
with the factories being shut down...

[There are dolphins and swans
swimming in the canals in Venice
—you can see schools of fish
swimming in clearer water]

[What if...this is]
A reset economically.
To care for working poor.
Awareness over lack of healthcare access
for over 30 million in the US.
The need for paid sick leave.
How hard does one need to work
to be able to live and
to have a life outside of work?

[What if this is a chance]
To face our mortality
— check back into “living” life
rather than simply working, working, working.

To reconnect with our elders,
who are so susceptible to this virus...
[to recognize] The presence of Grace for all...⁴

⁴ <http://gurpreetgill.com/what-if/>

Please do not hear me say this is God's doing.

Please do not hear me make lite

of what is going on

in real countries

in real people's lives.

We need space to grieve

what was

and may no longer be.

But our Christian hope

holds that what is going on right now

can also provide space

for us change the subject

shift our focus to what God is able to do—

which is always far greater

than any of us are able to imagine.

Benediction

Henri Nouwen writes,

“Hope frees us to live in the present,

with the deep trust

that God will never leave us.”

Friends in these days ahead,

may we be given new sight

to see our opportunity and calling

to serve and love each other

and may our hearts shift toward the trust

that God is ever with us. Amen.
