

“Let Those Who Have Eyes, See”

John 9:1-41 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn

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Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might learn to cut through the chatter and spin and see more clearly how you are calling us to live in response to the suffering of our world. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

It is good to be back! Thank you for being patient with me as I try to remember how to do my job. While I do use the computer files from previous weeks’ sermons to transfer the formatting for each new one, I am not a preacher who looks back at my old sermons very often. But since I’ve been away for a bit, this week, when I pulled up my sermon from January 18, to set up the manuscript for today, I thought maybe I should skim through the old one before I got started. You know, just to remind myself how this works. And what’s funny is that I realized, the deeper into the process I got, that I’m basically preaching the same sermon today!

Part of that is because both sermons used scriptures from the gospel of John. Scholars tend to describe John as the most “theological” of the gospels, by which they mean that the author is as concerned, if not more concerned, with telling us what Jesus meant as telling us what Jesus did. Today’s readings from chapter 9 provide a particularly complex example of that. One could argue – if you were assuming this passage is primarily a miraculous healing story – that the point is contained within

verses one through seven. Does anyone still have your Bible open? Want to remind us of that last sentence in verse seven? “Then he went and washed and came back able to see.” Jesus and the disciples come upon a man born blind. Jesus heals him. A story succinctly told in seven verses. One could guess that the rest is “just commentary.” But there’s a reason I wanted us to read the remaining 34 verses that follow. The fact that John went on and on about what happened after the initial transformative interaction is a hint that, for the author, this was not primarily a story of a miraculous healing.

And the thing that I think John is getting at here is the reason I’m preaching this sermon over and over these days. John is trying to warn us to be very savvy about the spin that is being put upon the news of the day, to be aware of how others’ agendas are influencing what we’re hearing and what we’re being told about what it means. In these days of authorities lying regularly with impunity and AI-generated deep fake videos, this lesson isn’t just about being shrewd media consumers. It’s about taking seriously the gospel call to identify, protect and proclaim the truth about what is happening in God’s world. So let’s take a look at some of the examples this story offers for how we can keep our eyes on the truth and respond faithfully, rather than getting distracted or pressured to ignore what’s unfolding right before our eyes.

First let’s look at the community members around this man who was born blind. The author of John tells us that many people knew him and they knew that he had

been blind from birth. Some of them clearly understood that he had been given the gift of sight. He was born blind; he'd lived his life up to this point blind, but now he could see. He had been changed. But others, as John tells it, said, it's not him, "but someone like him." They had known him all his life, and they knew he was blind, but apparently they thought it had been kept from them that he had a secret doppelgänger they'd never met till now. It can seem like a hard question – which is more likely: that a blind person can suddenly see, or that there's suddenly someone in town who looks exactly like that blind person but this person can see, and the blind person has disappeared? If you take a moment to consider that, you may figure it's 50/50, or at least a good question. But we also have to remember that the man was standing there repeatedly saying, "It's me! I'm him. I'm that guy." Now which one seems more likely?

The lesson here is one we do well to heed. As we learn more and more about the complexities of the human condition, we discover truths that challenge the categories we used to rely on to make sense of the world. We may be tempted to come up with "explanations" that involve leaps of logic that aren't actually supported by the facts, like those neighbors assuming they were seeing a body double. But the best way to come to deeper understanding about these things that may not make sense to us is to listen to the testimonies of those experiencing them. Consider, for example, the wanton discrimination and hatefulness the trans community is currently facing. Rather

than believing the vitriol of politicians with a fourth-grade comprehension of gender, let us dare to learn from trans people themselves, to listen to their stories and descriptions of what their lives and experiences are like. We don't have to fully understand what's going on for them to recognize that they know themselves better than we ever could. We don't have to personally comprehend what body dysmorphia feels like to believe people about which treatments and therapies bring them relief and make abundant living possible.

So, Lesson Number One: When life feels confusing and challenges our previous assumptions about how things work, listen to those impacted, rather than the people reacting out of fear and judgment, to learn how to expand our minds and our understanding of the world.

The next lesson I want to explore has us looking at how this man's parents responded to the situation. The writer of John makes very clear that they wanted to distance themselves from the whole situation. The immediate implication is that they're afraid of being put out of the local synagogue for affirming that Jesus had a miraculous impact on their son. They say to the authorities, "He is of age; ask him." They didn't even have the decency to tell him to his face, "We can't handle this, son. You're on your own!"

But if we notice an earlier clue, we might imagine that this was not a surprise for the man born blind. Did you notice how the neighbors first referred to him? They

didn't ask each other, "Is this not So-and-so's son who was born blind?" They said, "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?" It sounds like maybe he'd been on his own for quite some time now, despite being young enough that both his parents were still living and around. Perhaps it wasn't just the fear of being kicked out of their religious community for confessing Jesus as the Messiah that had created the distance between this couple and their son. Perhaps they'd been afraid of how his entire existence reflected on them ever since he'd been born.

Do not forget that this story opens with the disciples asking a question rooted in the common assumption at the time – that disabilities were punishment for sin. If he'd been struck blind later in life, they could have easily blamed him. But since he was born that way, it seems likely they spent his entire childhood wondering what they'd done wrong and assuming people were judging them every time their son came to mind. What a devastating way to grow up! Can you even imagine?

Rather than accepting their son for who he was and helping him find ways to as fruitfully as he could, they distanced themselves, presumably kicking him out of the house as soon as they could, so his "sinfulness" wouldn't be their responsibility anymore. There is a lesson here for any of us who have allowed our fear of others' judgment or accusations of "guilt by association" to keep us from showing compassion to others, whether family, friends, neighbors or strangers. Have we been influenced by the shared prejudices of our society to avoid people who are different or in need?

Have we been secretly grateful for the scapegoats our leaders identify, because their suffering keeps us from having to face up to our own complicity in what's wrong with the world? Do we share, if often unconsciously, that assumption that people's problems are their own darn fault, and therefore, not our responsibility to help address? We must face these painful failures of compassion, if we want to be open to the working of God in our families and communities. We must learn to be braver and worry less about what others will think. The risk of being kicked out of a treasured community is scary, but think of the joy of being able to transform and expand that community by helping them dare to expand their welcome!

The third lesson offered to us today brings the beginning and the ending of the story together. As we noted, the story could have ended at verse seven, when the man came back able to see. But instead it keeps going, because unlike the man himself, everyone is thrown into a tizzy by what happened to him. The religious authorities, in particular, are upset. They didn't like this Jesus fellow to begin with. And whatever happened here – which they're not convinced was anything at all – it shouldn't have happened on the sabbath! And thus, they conclude that what happened, if anything did actually happen, couldn't have been a good thing, because this Jesus guy was a sinner, as was plain to see because of how he **BROKE THE RULES**. But when the Pharisees are sent by his parents to ask the man himself, he brings them back to verse seven, because that is the one thing he knows. "I do not know whether he is a sinner.

One thing I do know, that though I was born blind, now I see.” And they continue to try to wriggle out of it, twisting and turning their logic all around till nothing makes sense at all. “We don’t know where he comes from,” they insist, as if unknown provenance was a reason to refuse a miracle. “Seriously?” says the man. And then he offers them another of Christ’s teachings from another gospel: “You will know them by their fruits.” “He made me able to see. How can that not be of God?”

There are many scholars these days who write about how the Bible’s portrayal of people with disabilities has done damage to people with disabilities in our own age, when there are so many more accommodations possible, if only there is will to use them. This story, in theory, could have centered on any type of disability, but it doesn’t, and for good reason. The lesson John is trying to offer us here is that we need to dare to trust what we see with our own eyes. We may not understand it; we may need to adjust our worldviews in order to fully embrace the new realities emerging around us. But we cannot let previous assumptions or fear or judgment cloud our capacity to discern the truth. We cannot let those who are more concerned with the rules than they are with people pressure us into limiting our compassion.

The disciples came into this story assuming the man’s blindness was the result of sin. The man’s parents clearly had lived in fear of the implications of that understanding his whole life. The Pharisees returned to that assumption when they tried to scold the man for testifying to what God had done in his life: “You were born

entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?” But in the end, the man is reunited with Jesus, and Jesus invites him into a new understanding. “I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind. . . . If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.”

Or as Dr. Amy Kenny puts it in her book, “My Body Is Not a Prayer Request,” “Disability helps reveal the Light of the World to people who think of themselves as holier than disable people. Disability is no longer a symbol of sin but one of being open to revelation. Disability unveils God’s work to the community, if only people are willing to receive it.”

There are a lot of people trying to spin what’s happening in our world today, using theological contortions to justify suffering, war and more. We need to be clear about the fruits we are seeking. We need to have a firm understanding of what it looks like when Jesus is present. We need to hone our capacity to recognize the signs of God’s work in our world and to discern when things are happening that are definitely not of God. Like the man born blind, we need to trust our own theological instincts so that we can see the fruits of God’s love and proclaim those truths, just as we denounce those who would claim that God’s hand is at work in anything that brings more suffering into the world. May we lay aside our fear, see clearly what is happening all around us, and proclaim the truth with love. Amen.

