

## *Nourishment for the Journey*

### *Ruminations on John 9.1-41*

The story of the 9th chapter of John is one of the longest stories about Jesus. It is found only in John's gospel and has been coined as an allegory of support for those Jewish Christians who have been kicked out of the synagogues by adamant religious leaders who cannot tolerate those who have come to think of Jesus as the Messiah. Such shunning would have had some negative emotional impacts on those Christian Jews who would have felt oppressed by their siblings in the faith, and treated as outcasts.

Jesus' message of inclusion for all broke many boundaries for orthodox Jews of his day. Women, Gentiles, and those with infirmities and diseases were all considered as less than worthy for full worship in the synagogues. All of these were thought to be ritually unclean for various reasons. Jesus tore down these spiritual walls, and affirmed those whom were shown condescension.

But it is one thing to know that you should be included, and quite another to be actually included. The disparity between these two realities can be unbearable at times. In Jesus' day and our own, there are those who have been ostracized because they are somehow different. This story focuses on a man born blind. In that time, anyone born with a disability would have been perceived as defiled. Their affliction would have been construed as the consequences of sin. The sin could have been their own, or that of their parents — as sin was thought back then to be able to be transmitted from generation to generation.

This theology of shame and sin was pervasive — such that not only the Pharisees, but Jesus' own disciples, were under the influence of this sort of thinking. It is why his own disciples asked him whether it was the blind man or his parents who had sinned. In their minds, it had to be one or the other; since only sin could account for his inability to see — the result of the punishment from God for that sin. Sadly, this sort of theology is still prevalent in some circles today.

Jesus rejected these assumptions, and declared that this man, and consequently others like him, were not to be regarded as sinners, nor cursed by God. Jesus' God was one of love and mercy, not wrath and vindictiveness. For Jesus, the idea that God would punish someone with an infirmity for something they or another did wrong did not mesh with his view of God as compassionate. Jesus did not regard anyone, even himself, as perfect. Indeed, he affirms that only God is truly good. While this might seem to support the view of some of his contemporaries that God was good and all others were sinful beings, this was not Jesus' understanding. God might be the only one truly good, but it does not follow that everyone else is loathsome and evil. In his view, we were born with the image of God within us. We all can, if we choose, reflect that image and do the works of God.

While Jesus does not explain all the reasons we go astray, it is clear in this story that he believes the blind man, considered to be among the most wretched of sinners since he was born this way (a fate only a very angry God would mete out for him; thus indicating the severity of his sinfulness), remained a person of inherent and inestimable worth — one in whom "God's works may still be revealed in him." Jesus proclaims, contra the view of everyone else, that he is not a sinner. This unconventional theology got Jesus in trouble quite often in his travels. Oddly enough, his pronouncement that God was loving, kind, and compassionate fell on some deaf ears and blind eyes — as if people preferred that God be construed as wrathful, vengeful, and punishing.

Why is that? Why do some people prefer a God who is going to "sock it to" the ones they construe as sinners? Why is it, too, that people pick out the "sins" they believe to be the worst ones, and totally ignore the others (especially the ones they have themselves)? It remains far too common for Christian today to think they are somehow morally superior to those who are different from themselves. While the same people would admit that we have all sinned and fell short of the grace of God, they nevertheless regard themselves as having been given a dispensation for their grievances that others are lacking — often times

based on their "right beliefs" and having little to do with whether they also have "right actions." How unlike this is from Jesus' own view!

Grace is not distributed willy-nilly by God based on what we believe about God; but rather grace, preeminent in each of our beings, is discovered and unleashed when we choose to treat others as we'd want to be treated. While we all may err, Jesus' view is that we all, yes each and every one of us, can live out the works of God in our lives by loving others as we love ourselves. Rather than regarding others, or everyone, as sinners, Jesus chooses to regard us as carriers of the image of God — people with the inborn capability to love and be kind and encouraging. He reveals this ethic by his own reaction to the man born blind. Instead of heaping more guilt and shame up on him like he had received from others his entire life, he instead lifts him up — telling him, and everyone present, that rather than being a sinner, he is one who can have God's works living through him.

Can you imagine being told how awful you are your entire life, and how you would never amount to much, and then receive this kind of contradictory information? All of his life he had been blinded to his own goodness because of how everyone told him how bad he was; and now he has someone telling him that everyone else had been wrong — that he really was a blessing just waiting to happen! The mythic power of this revelation to the man had to be enormous — like having been blind to his true being, only to have who he really is seen and revealed by this one called Jesus. (The word, "Jesus", literally means "Yahweh saves/delivers" — how appropriate for this man who had been saved from public opinion about who he was!) Salvation came to him in the form of being able to see himself for who he truly was; and no longer by the negative influences of those who always thought he was less than them.

Jesus, in placing an ointment of earth in his eyes, told him to go to the pool of Siloam to wash off. This had two connotations to Jews living at that time that might escape the contemporary reader. The pool would not only cleanse the mud from his eyes, but symbolically would also cleanse his soul. It was a "baptism" of sorts. Moreover, the word "Siloam" meant "Sent". In essence, Jesus was sending him to go live out his true nature, to do the good works of God, to love others as he now had come to love himself, as an affirmation to him and all who were witnesses of his transformation that he has divinity living within him. God's nature was his nature as well. With this new vision, he could live the rest of his life as an agent for God's goodness. This surely must have astonished the onlookers as much as it did he himself. Unlike the public shame and humiliation he had suffered for years, here he was being publicly vindicated, affirmed, and commissioned. The total reversal of circumstances had to be impactful for the crowd, and empowering for him. The transformation was not, therefore, for the individual man himself; but for his whole community. They would now have to see him with new eyes, even as he had received his own new eyes to see.

But of course, dramatic change, even if for the good, is often opposed and met with antagonism — as was the case with the Pharisees. Rather than admit the miracle and change their theologies, the leaders instead denied the miracle and reiterated their exclusionary doctrines. The truth was before them; and yet they regarded it as fake news. They could not see the goodness of Jesus while he was living, nor of the life-giving power he had on his followers generations after he left the Holy Spirit to be with us. The ironic twists and turns of this story, of how a blind man came to see, and how the sighted became blind to the miracle revealed in him, had to be transformative for the Jewish Christians who had been similarly despised by the authorities in the synagogues.

Living by the values of love revealed through Christ, as epitomized by his inclusive and empowering love for this man born blind, the ones thrown out of the synagogues would likewise be lifted up and made to see their reality as much of a blessing as the formerly blind man himself. What was important was not what the religious leaders thought of them or whether they were allowed in the synagogues, but rather that they could be witnesses to the love and light of God. They had been blind in thinking they were unworthy, but here was a story that affirmed their own worth. God's image was in them just as the man

born blind. They could see themselves anew; and, in turn, could help others who were blind to God's grace dwelling within them to gain sight of their own goodness.

Seeing ourselves as Jesus sees us, as God sees us, and as those who love us unconditionally, that is the good news for us. But it is only half of it. The other half is that we can love others likewise, and thus help them to see the good news of their own worth and ability to love. We, too, are commissioned to restore sight to those blinded by the ridicule of others. We are the healers of the worth of all of God's people and creatures. Like Jesus, we can respect, love, and encourage those we meet day by day — helping them to see and act on all of the goodness they have inside.

*--- Rev. Bret S. Myers, 3/23-24/2017*