

"Suspicion"
John 9:1-41
March 22, 2020 Lent Four
York Center Church of the Brethren
Pastor Christy Waltersdorff

Monologue

I couldn't see and then I could. It was as simple as that. But you know as well as I that nothing is simple when Jesus is involved- miraculous, glorious, confusing, unbelievable. But not simple. Let me start at the beginning.

I was born blind. Up until that day I had seen nothing for my entire life. I lived in a world of darkness. Don't get me wrong, I had a good life, my parents took care of me, I had friends, and people in the neighborhood looked out for me. I tried my best to be independent, I did not want to be pitied, but there is only so much you can do as a sightless person in a seeing world.

That day was like any other until it wasn't. I was sitting on our front stoop, listening to the people go by when I heard some strangers talking about me. "Whose fault is it?" they asked.

I was so tired of that one, as though my blindness had to be someone's fault. Then I heard something I had never heard before. "You are asking the wrong question."

I could feel his presence next to me when the oddest thing happened. I heard him spit onto the ground and then I felt his fingers on my eyes- smearing them with mud! Now, normally, this is not something that I would tolerate- I mean, really, would you? But there was something about this man. I don't know why-- but I trusted him. He told me to go wash my face in the pool and when I did- I could see. Instantly! My eyes were muddy, I splashed water on them, and I could see. It was the second best moment of my life.

Word spread pretty quickly and soon all the neighbors were gathered around me arguing about whether it was really me or not. They recognized me when I was blind but now that I could see they suddenly weren't sure if I was me. I kept saying, "It's me!" But they kept on arguing.

Finally someone dragged me to see the religious leaders. They too questioned me. Who are you? How did this happen? Who did it? I told them everything but they didn't believe me either. Then they sent for my parents. My poor folks were so scared of the crowd and the Pharisees they didn't know what to say. This was the first they had heard that I could see. It was quite a shock.

The Pharisees kept badgering me- who was it? Was he a sinner? How could he do such a thing?" They couldn't accept that a blind man had been miraculously healed so they were looking for alternative facts. They didn't know what to do with me- a blind man who now could see so they threw me out. I guess they thought if they couldn't see me, it didn't really happen.

I was trying to gather my wits about me and figure out what to do next. I didn't know where to go. Think about it, I didn't even know what my house looked like. And then I turned around and there he was.

I knew who he was because his was the first face I ever saw. He was the one who had healed me. I dropped to my knees and said, "Master, I believe."

When I stepped out of the house that morning I was the only one around who couldn't see. By the end of the day it seemed like I was the only one who could. People I had known my whole life didn't celebrate when I saw their faces for the first time, instead they argued and criticized. The religious leaders all but accused me of faking blindness my whole life.

To this day I don't know why I was the one he chose. I never asked Jesus to heal me. He sought me out. And he changed my life.

Wiping away the spit and mud, seeing Jesus- that was the best moment of my life.

After a combat injury in 1945, John Howard Griffin gradually lost his sight. By the time he was 27 he was totally blind. Ten years later, with no warning, he began to regain his vision. As his memoir, *SCATTERED SHADOWS*, explains, regaining his sight was as exhausting an ordeal as losing it. He writes, "*Many people wondered what it might be like to see again after a decade of blindness. Sight does not return full blown suddenly. You have to learn to see again, like a newborn infant. You have to learn to use muscles to focus. The adjustment back to sight was as complex as the adjustment to blindness had been. The simple mechanics of living had to be learned all over again: how to eat, how to walk, how to look at people. I kept forgetting that I could see, and that in seeing I could do many things that I had put out of my life. At the outset, sight was more of a burden than a help. Nothing looked as I had remembered.*" (1)

For the man we meet in the ninth chapter of John's Gospel, receiving his sight was no walk in the park either- at least not at first. If you knew someone who had been blind from birth, how do you think you would react if you found out they could see? You would be thrilled for them, right? Not for this guy. He was even blamed for being blind in the first place.

At that time, in that culture, anyone with a disability or an illness was blamed for their condition. It was all about sin. The disciples voiced what the people he knew probably asked all the time- was he blind because of his sin or the sin of his parents? It had to be somebody's fault.

While the others are standing around trying to place blame- Jesus just heals the guy. Spit, dirt, mud, voila- you can see! Cue the celebrations, right? Wrong! Instead of rejoicing with the man who can now see, his neighbors are trying to identify him. He is no longer who they thought he was.

"Are you sure it's him?" "It sure looks like him but it can't possibly be him- he can see!" All the while the man is saying, "It's me! Open your eyes! You have known me all of your lives!"

Did they only know him for what he didn't have- his sight? Instead of for who he was? He was the same person, after all, why was his identity suddenly a problem for them? Instead of celebrating with their friend, they made his cure all about them. And they couldn't make any sense of it.

In their fear and confusion, they took him to the religious leaders, the Pharisees. Instead of focusing on the miracle- for which they had no explanation- they were upset because the healing happened on the Sabbath- when you weren't supposed to do any work. By this time the Pharisees knew who Jesus was and they weren't about to give him any credibility as a man of God, so they argued with him. "*Who did this? Where is he? What do you have to say for yourself? Were you really born blind?*" The man who was healed just kept repeating his story. "*I was blind, a man spread mud on my eyes, and now I can see.*"

They weren't satisfied with his answers so they called in his parents and badgered them. "*Is this your son? Was he really born blind? How can he now see?*" The parents were intimidated and afraid. They knew how things like this worked. You didn't disagree with the leaders or they could kick you out of the synagogue. Finally, they said, "*He's a big boy. He can speak for himself. Ask him.*"

The leaders couldn't understand this so they finally just threw him out of the temple. So there he was, able to see, but with no place to go. And right there is where Jesus found him again.

"Do you believe in the Messiah?"

"Just show me who he is and I will believe."

"You are looking at him."

That is all it took. The man fell to his knees and said, *"I believe."*

Once again, Jesus brings healing, hope, and surprising new life. Instead of celebrating though, everyone around him gets caught up in a theological firestorm.

Anna Carter Florence writes, *"The Pharisees do not want to hear or believe the man's story, because it opposes the story they want to tell. They want Jesus to be the sinner, not the hero of the story; they want another explanation, one that leaves them in control of all the religious goods and services. They want to be the only ones who have the privilege of defining sin or dispensing grace."* (2)

Before we rush too quickly to condemn the Pharisees, though, let's open our own eyes and recognize ourselves in their fear and religious uncertainty. Barbara Brown Taylor writes, *"The Pharisees were so sure of everything; that God did not work on Sundays, that Moses was God's only spokesman; that anyone born blind had to be a sinner and ditto for anyone who broke the Sabbath; that God did not work through sinners, that God did not work on sinners, and that furthermore no one could teach them anything. Meanwhile the man born blind, who was not sure about anything, was the only one who saw the light."* (3)

Again and again this man told the truth about his encounter with Jesus. He was a witness to the audacious, extravagant power of God but others didn't want to hear the truth so they chose not to believe him. Walter Brueggemann suggests that this is a familiar confrontation between the old, established truth that keeps everything in place, has all the answers, keeps everything under control, and assures certain entitlements **AND** new inexplicable possibility brought to life by Jesus. It is the familiar story of the holders of privilege and power belittling and refusing to accept something new, something they cannot understand- no matter how wonderful it may be.

We find it so easy to criticize the Pharisees, and yet, the church today is not so different. We hold on to what we know because new things are risky. Jesus is an invitation and a summons to a different way of life. We are always making the decision about whether or not we will follow Jesus.

Amazing grace terrifies those who wish to remain right where they are. Transformation can be messy- dirt and spit, anyone?

Notice that the man who was healed could not describe his conversion moment to anyone's satisfaction, but he can tell the difference it makes. *"All I know," he says, "is that I was blind and now I can see!"*

Everyone around him can see the difference, if they are willing to open their eyes. Blindness has many causes. In the church it is often caused by fear, arrogance, skepticism, privilege, and ignorance. At the beginning of the story the blind man is the only one who **cannot** see. By the end, he is the only one who **can**.

When Jesus is around transformation takes many forms- physical, emotional, relational, spiritual. It is glorious! And it is also threatening to those who have something to lose if Jesus is, indeed, the Son of God. What we have to lose is our blindness and our fear. To follow Jesus is to develop clarity about who we are and who we are meant to be. Once we encounter Jesus, groping in spiritual darkness is no longer an unfortunate circumstance, it is a very poor choice.

Now more than ever, at this time in history, we need to be very clear about our identity. We need to allow Jesus to heal our blindness so we can stand firm on the foundation of faith. These are scary times but we are **not unprepared** for this. We are prepared because we have, for years, been nurturing a strong faith community. All of the time we have spent together in worship, fellowship, education, play, singing, praying, working, and eating- together- has been preparing us for this moment. We stand together as a solid, strong community of faith- supporting each other, praying for each other, delivering groceries if necessary. When one is afraid, another can offer words of comfort. Even though we can only connect through phone and video- we are still together- and no one needs to feel alone. The faith we have nurtured all these years will carry us through this time of pandemic.

Let us know how you are doing. Let us know what you need. And we will be there for you. Because that is what we do as followers of Jesus Christ. And when we can finally worship together, in person, together, we will celebrate!

The healing of this man takes only two verses. The controversy surrounding it takes 39. This is a complicated story in seven scenes. Jesus makes it easy but everyone else has an opinion and makes it difficult.

The world is blind.

The church is blind.

God's work, in Christ, is to heal it.

May we who are blind be healed

Amen.

End Notes:

- *SCATTERED SHADOWS: A MEMOIR OF BLINDNESS AND VISION*, John Howard Griffin, Orbis Books. 2004. P. 217.
- "Pastoral Perspective," Anna Carter Florence, *FEASTING ON THE GOSPELS*, Fourth Sunday in Lent, Westminster John Knox Press. 2010. P. 188.
- "A Tale Of Two heretics," *HOME BY ANOTHER WAY*, Barbara Brown Taylor. Cowley. 1999. Pp. 77-78.