

## To See or Not to See, That is The Question

A sermon by John Strommen on John 9:1-41 Feb. 11, 2018

We begin our story today with the Jesus' disciples observing a blind man begging in the streets, who was believed to have been *born* blind. The disciples wondered out loud what had caused this man's affliction. They figured there were two options: either he or his parents had sinned badly enough to cause the blindness. Sin was commonly believed at this time to be the cause of illness, deformity, misfortune. If it was the parents, their child was basically being punished for their sins. If it was the blind man himself...wait, if it was him and he was *born* blind, then when did he have the chance to sin before he was blind?? In the womb, of course. Yes, it was taught that a baby in the womb could sin. What sort of sin would that be? Kicking mom too hard? Planning to escape early? Putting on too much weight? Well, they had their reasons. Jacob, we may recall, was up to no good - even in his mother's womb!

Notice how this belief makes an armchair judge out of everyone. If someone has an affliction or misfortune, well, it must have been some awful thing they did.

Then Jesus says to the disciples, "No, his blindness has nothing to do with his sins. The blindness is there to reveal the glory of God." So rather than "whose sin caused this man's blindness?" the question Jesus poses is, "how might God's love be revealed in him? What kind of restoration may be at hand?" Do you see how Jesus is sort of saying, "OK, guys, don't look over there, but look right here." Right here being Jesus, God loose in the world restoring frail lives. And so he restores the eyesight of the man born blind.

How often do we assume when someone is suffering that it must be their fault? And if it is their fault, they're only getting what they deserve. It's commonly assumed by some that those who live in poverty or have chronic health issues are reaping what they sow. Then it's all too easy to say, "Well, they're not my business, then." But what if we saw human brokenness as an opportunity for the God of love to bring healing and hope? Maybe we would be less likely to think some people don't deserve good things(while we do) and more likely to want to share what we have because we think God is at work bringing light into a dark world.

And in this story, we're just beginning to see that sin itself is not what the disciples and everyone else thinks it is. It's not someone breaking a law or rule. It's not having an illness. Sin is *blindness*, the failure to trust in God who is fully present in Jesus. This story is about a blind man who recovers his sight in more ways than one and about a group of men who think they have 20/20 vision in all things spiritual, but plunge deeper and deeper into blindness.

We know the disciples don't see everything clearly, but now it's the crowd's turn. They have known this blind man for his whole life, yet after he is healed, the crowd doesn't recognize him. At least, they're not sure it's the same man.

How often do we not recognize the works of God because we are blind to the God who is active among us? One of the faith practices we've begun here at Mt Carmel is gratitude. Practicing gratitude can teach us to recognize God's good works in our lives and name them, give thanks for them. Another practice is

looking for where we see God showing up in our world to reveal his glory so that we are not blind to this. Some of us have even taken pictures of this.

There is much about blindness in this text, but it's the blindness of the Pharisees that really stands out. They've heard of the man's eyesight being restored, but they're convinced it's a bad thing. Why? Because even though a man who once was blind now sees, the Pharisees thought it didn't matter because the man who healed him broke the Sabbath law and is therefore a sinner. Specifically, it was well known that all faithful Jews tried to honor the law of Moses that you did not work on Sundays. One of the very specific codes meant that even "kneading" was forbidden. K-n-e-a-d-i-n-g. Jesus sinned by kneading mud on the Sabbath which he used to restore the man's eyesight. God would never sanction such a thing! And so the Pharisees interrogate the man who had been blind. How were you healed? How could a sinner do this? And so forth.

The Pharisees were legalists. That means the ultimate value of their religion, their "god" in effect, was laws and rules. When God showed up in Jesus, fulfilling and transcending the law, they couldn't see it. They couldn't see that restoring sight to a man, or forgiving someone and giving them new life, or loving someone back into existence, was more powerful than obeying every law to the very letter.

Do we sometimes do that with the law, even God's law? It happens all the time, every time someone makes the mistake of saying that because it says so in the Bible, or because it says so in our church constitution, it must be true for all times and all places. And yet there are norms, customs, laws right out of the Bible that are not relevant for us today. Why? Because most of the laws that guide us, even from the Bible, are not absolute and cannot be confused with the power of God to give life. If we *do* confuse them, we are in the unfortunate position of arguing that women have a subordinate place in the family and the church, that slaves should submit to their masters, that capital punishment of your children is warranted under certain circumstances, and that healing and helping people on the Sabbath is wrong. So, time to shut down hospitals on Sundays. Virtually all norms and laws in scripture, as well as church constitutions and by-laws, must be renegotiated with the guidance of the Holy Spirit for new times and places. To fail to see this is to fall victim to the blindness of legalism. It is to be alienated from God. Jesus made this very clear.

As their blindness grows, the Pharisees decide to talk to the parents of the man who was blind, thinking they can bully these common folk and extract a confession from them that their son was not actually blind – that this whole healing thing was "fake news." So they try to intimidate the parents with the threat of expulsion from the synagogue. The parents don't cave, but defer to their son for more details.

And so, the Pharisees are back at it again with the man who once was blind but now sees. They have a relentless need to be in control of the situation. "How could he do this if he was a sinner?" the Pharisees fuss and fume and grow redundant.

The man who was blind says, "I don't know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, though. I once was blind, but now I see." This guys' getting a little feisty! Throwing it back at the big, bad Pharisees!

In other words, “Oh, did Jesus commit the mortal sin of kneading mud on the wrong day? Forgive me for not being too concerned about that. All I know is he just transformed my life! Does that count for anything, you guys?”

And then they ask once again, how Jesus opened his eyes. The man who was blind increases his combative tone: “I’ve already answered that. You want me to tell you again? Perhaps *you* want to become his disciples?”

Now the Pharisees are ticked and their blindness increases. “We think you are a disciple of his!” they say. “We, however, are disciples of *Moses*,” as they thrust their chins into the air. And finally, the man who had been blind launches into a devastating rebuttal.

“Here’s an astonishing thing!” he says. “You don’t know where he comes from and yet he opened my eyes...Never once since the world began has someone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.” At which time, the Pharisees slurred him for being born into sin, i.e., blindness, and drove him out.

So, let me ask you, fellow Mt Carmelites, do you think faith and conviction can give you a little bit of courage? I think so! This nobody was standing up to the most powerful men in his society and getting the best of them. Perhaps we are too sheepish and passive in the face of those who would seek to control us and silence us. Who is that in our world? I invite you to discern. Who knows, we might find that faith gives us a bit of sass.

Enter Jesus again. Hearing that the man who had been blind was driven out, Jesus asked him, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?”

“Who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.”

Jesus said, “The one speaking to you is he.”

“Lord, I believe,” he said. And he worshipped Jesus.

In a stunning summary statement, Jesus then says, “I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.” And at this point, we know quite clearly who is who. The ones who thought they could see more clearly than anyone kept spiraling into ever greater levels of blindness. The one who started out without sight not only acquired it, but also acquired the vision that comes with faith - first physically, then spiritually. The man who had been blind went from referring to “this man called Jesus,” to “a prophet,” to “I don’t know if he’s a sinner or not, but I once was blind and now I see,” to finally, “Lord, I believe.”

And what does it mean for John, the Gospel writer, to have sight, to see? Finally, it doesn’t mean wisdom, it doesn’t mean moral superiority or obedience, it doesn’t mean intellect or understanding. It means you can see Jesus. You can see Jesus for who he is, the son of the God of love - the one who redefines our relationship with the living God and takes away the sin of the world. For John, sin is

nothing other than unfaith. So to “see” is to have faith, it is to trust in the transformative power of love made manifest in Jesus. Amen.