“How’s your sight?”

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John 9:1-41

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***9 As he 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 the 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.***

***8The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, “Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?” 9Some were saying, “It is he.” Others were saying, “No, but it is someone like him.” He kept saying, “I am he.” 10But they kept asking him, “Then how were your eyes opened?” 11He answered, “The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, ‘Go to Siloam and wash.’ Then I went and washed and received my sight.” 12They said to him, “Where is he?” He said, “I do not know.”***

***13They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. 14Now it was a Sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. 15Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, “He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see.” 16Some of the Pharisees said, “This man is not from God, for he does not observe the Sabbath.” Others said, “How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?” And they were divided. 17So they said again to the blind man, “What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.” He said, “He is a prophet.”***

***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.” 22His 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. 23Therefore his parents said, “He is of age; ask him.”***

***24So for the second time they [the Jews] 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.” 25He [the man healed] 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 man answered, “Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, 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.***

***35Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” 36He answered, “And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.” 37Jesus said to him, “You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.” 38He said, “Lord, I believe.” And he worshiped him. 39Jesus said, “I came into this world for judgment, so that those who do not see may see and those who do see may become blind.” 40Some of the Pharisees who were with him heard this and said to him, “Surely we are not blind, are we?” 41Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.***

One of my non-New Year’s Resolutions was to stop trying to explain things when no-one asked. Non-New Year’s Resolutions are those things that you for example, someone will say, “Look at how red the sunset is!” And I’ll respond with, “Wow, maybe that’s because the light….blah, blah, blah.” They’d probably rather I just enjoyed the sunset. Or, I’ll offer a solution to something even though it wasn’t presented as a problem. For example, “I’m really tired today.” My response might be, “That’s probably because you have that noisy neighbor.”

I’m not sure why I do this. Maybe you do too. It’s not really awful, but it’s something I’d like to be more careful about. Maybe I’m uncomfortable with random, so I just have to find out why, about everything. Maybe I think it’s a way of showing interest. I probably just want to seem smart. Or maybe I’m jumping to solution mode too quickly, trying to be helpful. I probably need to listen more carefully. See! Even now, I’m trying to explain, why it is that I try to explain things! “I can’t get my car to start.” is a statement looking for a solution. But “Look at how red the sunset is!” is not. My responses don’t always match the truth of the situation.

Imagine now, that you’re walking along with Jesus, listening and learning from him. We come upon a man who is blind, and for some reason we know that he was born without sight. A considered response from most people today if we’re being generous, would be to try to get him help, to give him money or food. We might wonder where his friends or family are. What I’m pretty sure we would *not* do, is look for someone to blame. But in the first century, it was common to look for other worldly causes for anything that was not considered usual. Who sinned, the disciples ask, this man, or his parents?

Certainly, someone must have sinned and caused this man to live without sight. With another example of Jesus breaking with society’s ways, he does away with that kind of thinking. No, no one sinned. And then he healed him. He healed him by spitting – interestingly, this is literally giving something of himself his actual DNA – and combining it with the earth, and laying it on the place of need. Then he gives the man instructions to go and wash in the pool of Siloam, a pool used for ritual bathing.

When the man came back, able to see, our text takes us next, not to scenes of the man running to tell others, shouting his good fortune to all who would listen. Jesus exits stage left in our drama, and doesn’t return until the final scene. The majority of the drama in this text isn’t even about the miracle.

Deborah Kapp, one of my seminary professors and the author of one of the commentators I was reading this week, pointed out that three years ago the idea of social distancing became the rule of the day. (Indeed, it was Tuesday, March 17th, three years ago when the session met and painfully came to the decision to stop holding church services in person.) Three years later, we are now learning more and more of the damages and cost of social isolation. Her commentary pointed out that in this text, every single part of the man’s social network, let him down. Calling it an erosion of social capital, she points out that “each of the supports, which we assume are in place, fails to deliver.”1

First, his neighbors don’t even recognize him. They have seen him begging in the street, but they never saw him. Just like last week when we talked about how we see or don’t see people who are different from us or in different places than we expect, the neighbors don’t even think he is the same man. It’s as if his blindness was his identity and they don’t recognize him without that identity. Even after he tells them that he is that man, and he tells them the truth of what happened.

Then they take the man who was healed to the Pharisees, who also don’t believe the miracle of the man who can now see. Even after he tells them again, what happened and who performed this healing. The Pharisees, those people who Know Things, cannot fathom anything other than what they know, and since Jesus healed on the Sabbath, he must not be from God. If he doesn’t observe the sabbath, and is not from God, the Pharisees ask the man directly, what do you say about him? He’s a prophet, is his answer.

This text is almost a comedy show. The neighbors, the Pharisees, do not want to admit that a miracle has occurred and that this man, blind from birth, can now see. The man must be lying, he is not the same man they have seen begging in the streets. So they go to the man’s parents, and ask, is this your son, the one who was born without sight? Yes, they say, this is him, but we don’t know how it is that he can now see. Knowing that anyone who said Jesus was the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue, they gave the question back to the Pharisees, letting their son answer for himself.

Stubborn, stubborn neighbors, Pharisees, Jews, they still want to settle the matter without saying Jesus is capable of healing, without saying Jesus is from God. They insist that Jesus is a sinner, and insist that the man healed give glory to God. I wonder if the man healed was frightened of these authorities, exasperated at not being believed maybe. Refusing to be pulled into the argument about who gets to define a sinner, he says I don’t know anything about that. I was blind and now I see. He tells them again about the spit and the mud and the washing, challenging them – do you want to hear it again so that you can become one of his (Jesus’) disciples? Angered, they stand on their knowledge of God, refusing to color outside the lines, and remind the man that God spoke to Moses, we are disciples of Moses.

The man insists on his own story and truth and offers more and more of his own reflections every time he has to tell it again. Not wanting either to get drawn into the argument about where Jesus is from, he admits that he doesn’t know where Jesus is from geographically. He does know in his heart, using the logic he understands, that Jesus must be from God. The man healed knows God does not listen to sinners, and yet he listened to this man, therefore this man Jesus is not a sinner. Therefore he must be from God to have been able to perform the miracle.

Too much for the Pharisees, they cannot see this man as valid, so they turn him out of the synagogue. He is literally in-valid in their minds, so they return him to his invalid, in-valid, status, out of the synagogue. To the Pharisees, the Jews, the neighbors, his parents, he was expendable, a burden, he’s not even human. He’s only Blindness. Without that, he doesn’t belong.

If the text were to stop here, I would feel heartbroken for the man who was healed. Imagine having something major in your life changed by an encounter with God, maybe in the form of good doctors, a perfect intervention just in time, or some truly good news that will allow you to have a much freer life. But then because your neighbors, your church, your parents, don’t believe your story, they don’t trust your new look, you find yourself just as alone as before. Still isolated and still struggling. I find myself stunned that this story of a healing miracle doesn’t contain any joy or wonder or gratitude or awe.

Why are we so distrustful of a changed life? Why are we so distrustful of amazing mysterious reasons for someone else’s success. Why do we hang on to our certainties so tightly?

I read a quote this week attributed to Mother Teresa that said something like, “If you don’t like change, don’t seek God.” If we don’t accept God’s work in others, then we cannot accept God’s work in ourselves. Similarly, when we recognize God’s work in ourselves, we are open to seeing God’s work in others. We are less likely to drive out or push away any witnesses to God in their lives, because we know it can be true. If we have a rock solid immovable mind-set, we are missing the fullness of life, of the possibilities of others, of lessons that might leader into a deeper sense of God’s presence in the world. It is very humbling even threatening to be faced with a new life. The Pharisees don’t want to not be in control. Even the new life of a man once blind, who can now see can be frightening because his life will be drastically different. And now, instead of having the support he needs, he will need to find a different way to get through life. It’s as if his blindness turns out not to be the worst thing to have happened to him.

Fortunately the text did not end there. Jesus re-enters the drama, and does another key thing that occurs in the gospel of John. Just like Jesus said to the woman at the well, “I am he.” Jesus reveals himself to the man healed, answering the man’s desire to know where this man may be found, “You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.”  Instead of running to tell friends as the woman at the well did, the man healed confessed his belief, and he worshipped Jesus as Lord.

The Pharisees, who know things, think they are in the light and they can see the truth. But being blind to the central truth of who Jesus is, and I would add blind even to the possibility that God would be present in the life of the man born blind, the Pharisees are not in the light.

Our job is not to pull anyone into our own light – come see the world the way I do, we’ll all be in the light together. Because that makes us just like the Pharisees who are so sure that they can see, they don’t recognize their own closed thinking. We never know when we are actually the blind one in need of healing. We shouldn’t have the audacity to say that we understand all of God and God’s workings. At the same time, seeing the world through the eyes of God, through the hopes of God, is not futile either. Rather than claim certainty on behalf of others and claim to be the ones who Know Things, our job is just to bring the light. Be the light. So that what needs to be seen can be seen.

I will end with this poem, by the Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai, which was presented by two of the commentators I read this week, so I took it as a sign.

From the place where we are right

Flowers will never grow

In the Spring.

The place where we are right

Is hard and trampled

like a yard.

But doubts and loves

Dig up the world

Like a mole, a plow.

And a whisper will be heard in the place

Where the ruined

House once stood.

Let us pray,

1Kapp, Deborah, Feasting on the Word Series, Year A, Vol. 2, pp.116-120.

2Jennifer Garcia Bashaw, Associate Professor of New Testament and Christian Ministry, Campbell University, Buies Creek, North Carolina, Working Preacher commentary for 3/19/23