

WPC
Rev. Ken Sunoo
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Seeing Again for the First Time
John 9:1-41

I've shared with you already what an interesting and challenging journey it has been for me this year to preach from the Revised Common Lectionary – a set of weekly texts used ecumenically in many churches. Sometimes the text you get, as a preacher, is easy to talk about. Sometimes it's surprising. And some weeks you have to ask yourself, in the face of whatever you or your congregation has been facing – Really? Seriously, this passage, God? For this week?

Most of you know that last week after coffee hour we gathered for a prayer and healing service for Linda Eckert, who is struggling with her vision. We asked God to heal her affliction, knowing that God could answer “yes” but might answer “no.” We also hoped and prayed for God to restore her to wholeness of life, knowing that to be cured is not necessarily the same thing as to be healed. That was Sunday. On Monday I opened my Bible to the lectionary passage and here's what I found – the story of the blind man being healed.

I was so thrown that I debated whether to preach on this passage this week or not. I even ran it by Linda, who assured me that it would be fine to do so. At any rate, this is the assigned text for today. And perhaps there is really something God does want us to hear in the midst of all this. There would be any number of ways to do this really badly. I'll ask you to pray me through this as I do my best to bring God's word to you.

Sadie has read for us the first part of this passage, and I'll now read the rest. [READ TEXT – John 9:13-41]

I don't truly know what it's like to be blind, but I did get a glimpse (pun intended) of the experience about 5 years ago. Since the time I was in 3rd grade I had always needed to have my vision corrected with eyeglasses and later, contact lenses. My vision was 20/400 in one eye and 20/450 in the other. In other words, I could see at 20 feet what people with good eyesight could see at 450 feet. According to the World Health Organization's International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities and Handicaps,

circa 1980, I fell into the category of “profound low vision.”¹ Without glasses or contacts, I was nearly blind.

After over 20 years of wearing contacts, my eyes started to react badly to them. The contacts would dry out so fast that I couldn’t wear them all day anymore. So, with much fear and trepidation, in 2006 I decided to undergo Lasik surgery to correct my vision. The procedure was relatively quick and simple, but there was one point during the surgery that was a bit worrisome. To reshape your eye, the surgeon creates a thin, circular flap in the cornea and then folds the hinged flap out of the way in order to remove some corneal tissue underneath. When the flap is lifted, you temporarily lose all vision in that eye. That’s an unsettling experience. At that point, all I was thinking was, “OK, now bring it back. Don’t have a heart attack right now, Mr. Surgeon. No natural disasters either, God. Not until after he puts my eyes back together again.”

And then, to my amazement, the surgeon does put the flap back, and all of a sudden, I can see clearly. Truly, I was blind, but now I see. On the car ride home, I kept saying to Deb, “Look at that sign – I can read it clearly!”

¹ <http://home.netcom.com/~mrlucky/vision.html>

Because of my experience, I have a soft spot in my heart for this blind man in this story. He had it much tougher than me – he was born completely blind. But he gets healed by Jesus, and ironically, once he’s healed, his problems really begin! Let’s take a closer look at the text.

We find out from John C. 7 that Jesus had gone to Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles, and is apparently still there. During the festival, large candelabra were lighted in the temple courts. Because the temples were elevated, the light could be seen throughout the city. In John 8, Jesus declares himself to be the light of the world (8:12); in today’s reading (John 9), Jesus not only repeats this claim, he “illustrates that he is the light of the world by giving sight to a man in darkness” (Brian Stoffregen).

Today’s passage seems to put the Pharisees in a really bad light (again, pun intended). The problem, strictly speaking, was not that Jesus healed the man of his blindness – nobody thought *that* was a bad thing – but it was the fact that Jesus happened to heal him on a Sabbath day, which *was* considered a bad thing since it violated the accepted interpretation of the Sabbath commandment. “The result was a deadly combination for rigid religious institutions – a good thing that doesn’t fit the rules.” (Long, 42)

So the Pharisees harass the blind man after he receives his sight; they interrogate his parents; and they condemn Jesus for healing on the Sabbath. Finally, Jesus accuses them of spiritual blindness. They seem to have lost sight of God's grand plan for humanity because of their legalism – an appropriate hymn to describe their spiritual blindness might be “Amazing grace, how disturbing the presence, once I saw, but now I'm blind.” (Long)

All this is true. But I want to point out v. 16: “Some of the Pharisees said, ‘This man is not from God, for he does not observe the Sabbath.’ But others said, ‘How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?’ *And they were divided.*” Notice, the Pharisees came to argue with Jesus. The Sadducees weren't there, but the Pharisees were so intrigued by Jesus that they often struggled with Jesus directly. We should give them credit for that.

Also, notice that the Pharisees were not all of one mind – they were divided. Perhaps Nicodemus was there, arguing on behalf of Jesus (after all, he was doing just that in chap. 7). If so, he was joined by others. They had enough integrity that even though they were disturbed by Jesus' actions and didn't understand them, some of them went so far as to defend Jesus.

This passage “is pregnant with matters of major importance” (Fred Craddock): the disciples ask about the relationship of suffering to sin, and Jesus makes it clear that “we can conclude from sin to suffering but not from suffering to sin.” (Gerard Sloyan). In other words, although sin often leads to suffering, Jesus challenges the thinking that suffering was always the direct result of sin by denying that the man was blind because of his own sins or his parent’s sin. Jesus acts on his own initiative and not in response to the blind man’s faith. “Indeed, we cannot find God; we can only *be* found.” (Tom Long) The man’s faith follows rather than precedes healing. We learn that the blind see and the seeing are blind, and that Jesus is the one sent to give light to the blind, both physically and figuratively.

The healing miracle itself only takes two verses. In fact, Jesus only appears at the beginning and the end of this story. In between times, the man is on his own. But notice how he gains momentum during the story as he seeks to discover who had healed him. Barbara Brown Taylor says, “He has come a long way. At the beginning of the story, he called Jesus a man, then a prophet, then a man come from God. It is almost as if his vision keeps on improving so that he sees more and more clearly who has given

him his sight. Finally he gets the name right, as well as the response. ‘Lord, I believe.’”²

Fred Craddock states, “The authorities are in a bind; they must accept the man as healed and accept the healer as a person of God, or they must hold to their view of the law concerning the Sabbath and reject the healed and the healer. The healed man is excommunicated. And he never asked to be healed in the first place! Those who are blessed by Jesus soon run into trouble in the world because good news has enemies.

In the final scene, Jesus returns. The healed man meets and confesses faith in Jesus, whereas the oppressors come under the judgment of the revelation of who they really are. And this is the judgment, that ‘the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light’ (3:19). The healing has made it clear: light comes to those who recognize that life is blindness without Christ; darkness comes to those who without Christ claim to see.”³

I love this story of Jesus healing the blind man. It shows the sheer grace of God. Some people are troubled by this sign, this healing miracle, because it’s not in accord with science. I’m not so troubled by that – I’m

² Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home by Another Way*, p. 76.

³ Fred Craddock, *Preaching Through the Christian Year A*, p. 173.

actually more troubled because Jesus didn't (and doesn't) heal *more* people like this blind man. When I read this story, even though I'm still astounded by the love and grace shown by Jesus in finding and healing this blind man, I'm also troubled by the fact that Jesus chose to cure this particular blind man and not others. I wonder - why does God choose to heal some people, but not others?

This story clearly shows us that God loves us enough, and he has enough power, to cure us of illness and disability. Then why doesn't he cure everyone? What bothers me personally about miracle stories, as great as they are, is not so much that miracles happen, but rather why doesn't God perform those kinds of miracles for everyone? Where would be the problem with being an equal opportunity healer?

I don't know. I do know that to be healed is not always the same as to be cured. To be healed is to be made whole by God, to be aware that God can still work through our wounds and afflictions. But I don't know why God doesn't cure more of our afflictions. Even the Apostle Paul asked three times to have the thorn in his flesh removed, and the only answer he received was, "My grace is sufficient."

I know I'm not the only one asking such questions, least of all in this congregation – and about the matter of eyesight no less. And I'm not sure if I've ever heard a completely satisfactory response, but Fred Craddock has helped me the most in my struggles. He says:

“The disciples had their expectations for the Messiah. No question about it. When the Messiah comes, when the Messiah comes, every beautiful story started that way. Like we would start one, “Once upon a time...,” they started them, “When the Messiah comes...” Beggar on the street, tin cup fastened to the neck of his guitar.

“Brother, I'm sorry, I don't have any money, but when the Messiah comes, there will be no poverty.” See the cripple, useless limbs folded beneath the trunk of his body? Brother, I wish I could help you but when the Messiah comes, there will be no cripples. The young girl assaulted by Roman soldiers, the father pats her on the back, “Honey, honey, honey, I know, I know. But, when the Messiah comes, no more violence.”

Go to the home of a couple married 14 years still rocking an empty cradle. Well, when the Messiah comes, every house will be full of happy, laughing children. “When the Messiah comes, when the Messiah comes there will be no misery.”

And then Jesus came, and they said, “He’s the Messiah.’ And look what happened. There was misery and there was misery and there was misery. And those 12 disciples had to make a majestic flip-flop. Wherever the Messiah is there is no misery? No, but wherever there is misery, there’s the Messiah.” (Craddock, Great Sermons)

Where there’s misery, there’s the Messiah. Where there’s death, the Messiah’s been there, too. And where’s there’s life after death, only the Messiah makes that possible. In sickness and in health, in living and in dying, in misery and in comfort, there’s the Messiah, the light of the world. That’s the good news of the Gospel. Amen.