

John 9:1-41

9As 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 the man.” 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.” But 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 called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, “Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner.” ²⁵He 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, and 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 near 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.

Doesn't Anyone Want to Celebrate?

There's a tradition in the U.S. Army – I don't know how long it's been going on, but it was in effect in the 1990s when I served. And the tradition is this. Every new soldier, when he arrives at his first duty station after basic training, is told by his barracks roommate that you don't have to work on your birthday. Your roommate makes it a point to tell you this. In fact he usually asks you when your birthday is, and he reminds you to tell the sergeant when he wakes you at “first call.” And the reason your roommate makes it a point is because he knows that *this is a lie*, and there's nothing more pleasing to a soldier than to hear a sergeant “sound off” on a new recruit. So you can imagine the scenario as you wake up at 5 a.m. to your sergeant yelling, “First call,” and hearing your naïve roommate responding, “Sergeant, today is my birthday!” to which the sergeant replies something like, “Oh, that's wonderful, Private; how old are you? **Get your miserable carcass out of bed NOW SOLDIER. FORMATION IS AT 0600!**” There is a slightly perverse humor that permeates the military. I still laugh at some of the pranks that were pulled on me and on others.

I say perverse because to some poor soldiers, who may be right out of high school, living away from home and in a very tense environment, they may fail to find the humor in such pranks. They may really be expecting a birthday party, or at least a break from the long hours of duty, and maybe some comrades who will celebrate with them, and instead they get the proverbial rude awakening and no celebration at all! I can't help but think that some soldiers were really depressed on their birthdays.

Today's Gospel lesson kind of reminds me of that loneliness. Here we have a man who is born blind who is healed by Jesus, and if there's ever a person who feels like celebrating it's got to be this fellow who has just received sight. This is a once-in-a-lifetime event; that's better than a birthday! And I would think that he was looking for someone to celebrate with him, and no one was there to do that.

Part of the reason is that there was a stigma attached to this man because of his blindness; the disciples hint at that stigma when they ask Jesus if this man is blind because of his own sins or the sins of his parents. People with disabilities still struggle with this stigma today; people are quick to assume that there was some sin either of the persons with the disabilities or their parents that led to this tragic outcome. This belief is not much different from the notion of karma; what you do, good or bad, has an effect on you, and if you are born with a disability it must be because of something you did in a previous life. And the good and bad that you do in this life have consequences in this life as well. There are Christians who believe this. The problem with such beliefs is that they simply aren't true; the truth is that bad things happen to good people and good things happen to bad people; there may be some natural consequences for actions – if you stick a fork in an electric outlet you are likely to be electrocuted – but not everything works this way. A person is born with Autism by no fault of his own and no fault of the parents; it is what it is. We like to believe that there's justice for those who break civil laws – if a person robs you, he is captured, convicted, and pays for his crime – but that ain't always the case – I'm not just being cynical here; people of power and wealth can very often get away with murder quite literally; talk to Kim Jong Eun. Talk to the guys who were acquitted and later admitted that they had murdered Emmett Till. One of the hardest things for us to accept is that justice does not always prevail in this world. And so it is with this man who was born blind. Yet there's this implicit assumption, especially among the healthy and whole, that this guy or his parents must have done something to deserve this condition.

Jesus understands that “the rain falls on the just as well as the unjust.” When his disciples ask if it was the sins of this man or his parents that caused him to be born blind, Jesus says, “Neither!” He's not going to fall into the trap that so many people fall into of implicating someone for this man's condition. It is what it is. It's one of the hardest things we have to get used to in this world, and *why bad things happen to good people* is a theological question that Jesus answers by saying “*So that God's works might be revealed in him.*” Jesus doesn't get caught up in wondering *why* this man was born blind; instead he looks for an opportunity to do God's work in and through this man. **And we should take this cue from Jesus;** when we see someone who needs help we should see an opportunity for us to do God's work by ministering to the one in need rather than trying to imagine why this person might deserve to be so afflicted. THAT'S NOT OUR JOB, and if we waste our time trying to figure this out it won't be long before we imagine some divine judgment going on that has made this person *deserve* this “punishment,” and thus we have rationalized why we can be indifferent to his suffering. “That's just God's will; far be it from me to interfere with that.” No, Jesus sees suffering and affliction as an

opportunity to show God's love and God's power. We may not be able to rub mud on a man's eyes and cause him to see again, but we can help him gain food, have a decent home, get health care, and have access to music and audio books. We can support research that focuses on restoring sight to the blind. We don't need to waste our time asking why this man is blind; we just need to help him.

And when healing occurs, we need to be there to celebrate with the one who is healed! The focus of today's message is upon *nurturing* one another; that's one of the promises we make in our Baptismal Covenant. And one way of nurturing is to encourage, to rejoice alongside the one who is rejoicing. Here in our Gospel lesson we find that there is no rejoicing. There is no nurturing of this man who is born blind. At precisely the time when the congregation should be celebrating this amazing miracle of healing, we find instead that the poor man is interrogated. Instead of focusing on the wonderful work that God has done, everyone is caught up in the technical details of the event, and the family and congregation try to distance themselves from the man and the miracle in order to protect themselves. The Pharisees end up throwing him out of the Temple; that's worse than a sergeant yelling at you on your birthday. Where is the loving, supportive community that this man needs, that *we all* need?

Are we the kind of loving, supportive, nurturing church that we ought to be? Particularly, are we nurturing our newer members? Every church has a well-established way of doing things, and unfortunately, with those well-established ways can also come well-established cliques – the same group of people in charge of the same ministries who carry out the same tasks in the same way. And it can be hard for newer members to literally break into those cliques or to inject new ideas and new ways of doing things without being met by church Pharisees who object to their methods. Are people being cast out of the church, or discouraged from joining or getting involved because there's too much pressure to conform to the status quo? Are the gifts of our newer members being celebrated or shunned? Are they being encouraged to participate and try new things, or are they being forced to fit into a pre-existing Jello mold? These are questions that the more senior members need to ask themselves. Every new member brings with her or him new gifts, new ideas, new inspiration. Can we as a church encourage them to be themselves and celebrate the work that God is doing in them?

That's our challenge and our confession this Lenten season. We haven't always been a nurturing church. We've let our own pride interfere with God's work, and we can do better. God seems to have a lot of faith in our ability to do so, because people continue to come to church, and new people continue to join the church. That is very encouraging, and it's just like God to keep challenging us by leading new people through our doors. So let us celebrate what God is doing by celebrating one another, by nurturing one another, all in a spirit of love and grace.