

Talking with Jesus: Opening Blind Eyes
First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, Alabama
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John 9:1-41

⁹As Jesus 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; but in order that the glory of God might be revealed in him, we must work the works of the one 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.

I wonder what it was like the first time someone saw a microorganism. The person who actually had that experience was Antoni Van Leeuwenhoek. Van Leeuwenhoek was a draper, and started making his own magnifying lenses so that he could get a closer view of the fine threads he was using in his draperies. But as he got better and better at making these lenses, and as their magnifying power increased, he began using them to examine other things—things like mold and bees and lice. Then, on October 9, 1676, he looked through his latest lens and saw something he hadn't even known to be looking for—these strange, single-celled life forms. Bam! A whole new world opened up. Van Leeuwenhoek was thrilled by his discovery. The Royal Society in London however, which had been very supportive of his earlier work, turned their backs on him at this point, apparently thinking he was some kind of crackpot. It took a while and a lot of convincing for them to come around.¹

Now we, of course, are all-too aware of micro-organisms. These days, I imagine them lurking on every possible surface! But that's not why I told this story. I told it because van Leeuwenhoek's lenses opened his eyes to something he'd been blind to before—whole worlds of organisms that had existed all along, just living their best lives, while humans were completely unaware of them.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antonie_van_Leeuwenhoek

Something like that happens in our Gospel passage today. Many, many eyes are opened in different ways. And even as eyes are opening, other eyes are completely missing what's happening right in front of them, just like the Royal Society did initially.

The passage starts with the disciples noticing the man who was born blind. So, this man's never seen anything. But Jesus spits on the ground, makes mud, and smears it on the man's eyes. Then, he sends him to wash at the pool of Siloam, which means "sent," and the man comes back seeing.

There are other kinds of blindness, though, than just not having functioning eyes. It is entirely possible—even common—to look right at something and be blind to what we're actually seeing. That's certainly something I experienced back in high school and college labs, because unlike van Leeuwenhoek, I was terrible at understanding what I was seeing through a microscope. It was not unusual for me to mislabel the parts of cells or the various microscopic creatures that we were supposed to identify.

That's the kind of blindness that really stands out in this story—people looking, but misinterpreting or mislabeling what they see. When the disciples spot the man born blind, the first words out of their mouths are, "Who sinned so that he was born blind, this man or his parents?"

So when they look at the man, what they see is sin, and God's judgment. Their way of seeing keeps them detached and clinical, as though they're looking at a laboratory specimen.

But when Jesus looks at the man, what he sees is a person in need, and, in responding to that need, a chance to show God's glory and grace.

Interestingly, though, he also sees capability. He doesn't treat the man as a helpless, passive object: he makes him a partner in his own healing by *sending* him to wash at the pool. He doesn't take him by the hand, or ask one of his disciples to guide him. He simply sends him, rightly assuming that the man has the capacity find his own way; and he's right. The man's been navigating this community all his life. He demonstrates his resourcefulness and his desire for healing by going straight to the pool with no apparent difficulty, whatsoever; and he returns with new vision.

That's when we learn of another kind of blindness. His own neighbors, who know his family, who must have walked by him every day, ask "Is this the man who used to sit and beg?" First, they don't even know his name. Second, they must have never really looked at his face or seen him as a person before, because they can't even agree about his identity.

And then, we have the Pharisees. When they look at this man who, just this morning, was completely blind and is now standing there with eyes wide open, they don't see a miracle. They see sin. *Jesus's* sin. "That man broke the Sabbath laws!" Here is a man suddenly made whole, and they are worried about Sabbath law. They really can't see the forest for the trees.

But they're not alone, are they? Neither are the disciples or the neighbors, because haven't we all demonstrated those different kinds of blindness? Haven't we, like the disciples, noticed someone who was struggling—a person living on the street, a parent with a problematic child, a juvenile locked up behind bars—and seen a chance to point a finger rather than an opportunity to show God's compassion?

And haven't we, like the neighbors, walked by people every day—or even sat next to them in the pews—without ever really seeing them, or learning their names, or imagining their life beyond that setting?

And haven't we, like the Pharisees, gotten so bogged-down in rules and regulations that we've missed ways to show grace to people? I mean, my goodness—we're Presbyterians! We're all about the rules!

Yes, we can be blind in a lot of different ways. But I'll tell you something: this last week has helped me to see things in a whole new way. We've had to throw out old rules of how to be church, just so that we can continue to be church! And I've been

moved to see the willingness of our staff and our members to roll with the punches and figure things out along with us.

And I see individuals in a whole new way. Last Tuesday we had staff meeting by Zoom, each of us in our own homes. Laura's cat was hanging out with her and had a few words to say; Cat was behind her computer at home, and Gillian and Maddie came in to join us for a bit, all decked-out in their St. Patrick's day finery. Then, that evening, we had the Zoom version of Focus @ First, with members both of First Presbyterian and Montevallo joining from their homes as Sam taught from our living room couch.

There is something strangely intimate about seeing one another in our natural habitats—with our families and pets and books and pictures all around us. I've realized that it helps me to see the fullness of people's lives beyond church, where we usually see each other.

And the *reason* that we're doing these things—this frightening pandemic—makes me see, even more clearly, how fragile each person is, and, therefore, how very, very precious.

And if there is anything good about this pandemic, it is *that*. This stark reminder not to take anyone for granted. This reminder that loving one another is a matter of urgency.

Jesus says to his disciples in answer to their question about sin: “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; but in order that the glory of God might be revealed in him, we must work the works of the one who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work.”

The New Revised Standard Version inserts the phrase, “...*he was born blind* that God’s glory might be revealed in him,” but that phrase isn’t in the original Greek.² God doesn’t cause human suffering, whether it’s blindness or pandemics—just to set the stage to show God’s glory. God doesn’t do evil in order to do good. There are many causes for bad things to happen—but when they do happen, God creates the possibility for glory, by giving *us* the opportunity to see the need, and respond as Jesus would.

And so, my friends—that is the opportunity before us. To see—really see—one another with new eyes and new hearts. To look with compassion rather than judgment on those who are struggling. To remember that the woman with the “please help” sign by the freeway ramp or the young man in prison or the family member trapped in addiction is a human being—with clear limitations but also with real capabilities to participate in their own healing, given half a chance.

² Frances Taylor Gench, *Encounters with Jesus: Studies in the Gospel of John* (Louisville: WJK Press, 2007) p. 65.

Jesus said to his disciples, “We must do the works of the one who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work.” In these strange days when our regular work has been upended, we can still do the works of the one who sent us. We can create some daylight in the midst of the darkness by really seeing and responding to one another; in fact, wherever we are, we *are* doing the works of the one who sent us, so long as we keep our eyes open to the beauty and worth of every person.

For each person—every one of you--is a manifestation of the glory of God. I hope we can see that now. Thanks be to God.