

March 19th, 2023

John 9:1-41 “Who Sinned?”

When I was in High School I had a neighbor around my age named George who had some pretty significant intellectual and developmental disabilities. Back then the term that folks used was “mentally retarded” which was a derogatory blanket label for a large number of cognitive and developmental issues. But that was the 80s and fortunately things have changed since then. George was awesome. There weren’t many people who picked on George because he was such an easy-going, joyful kind of guy. His favorite song was John Denver’s “Sunshine on My Shoulders,” and he would sing it. A lot. But instead of laughing *at* him, we would all join in and butcher the song right along with him. And we would *all* laugh. He would crack the corniest jokes. He was eager to help others and generous to a fault. He would give you the shirt off his back if you needed it. He loved board games and every Friday night some friends from the neighborhood would get together and we’d have game nights at our different houses. We liked it when it was George’s turn to host because he had a video game console which was a rarity back then. His best quality though? He was a good listener. There were a lot of people who would tell George about troubles they were having just because he’d listen and they knew he’d keep it confidential. He was very naïve and there were some folks who’d take advantage of his generosity, but he was a genuinely well-liked person despite his disability. He got a standing ovation when he graduated with the Elmira High School class of 1984. We knew he would never be able to live independently, but we were proud of him because of his tenacity.

His family life was complicated. He’d always say, “My dad is my uncle” which took us awhile to do the math and figure that one out. But when he moved to our community, neither his dad nor his uncle was in his life, but his mom was living with a guy named Bill, who had severe Parkinson’s disease. And every now and then George would say, “My parents said that when I turn 18, I can’t live with them anymore.” We never really knew what that meant. To be honest, he didn’t either. So

we were thinking, does this mean they'd found a place for him, like a group home where he could learn trade skills? Did that mean someone in the family agreed to look after him after he graduated high school? It made sense because his mom was barely holding on trying to care for Bill with his Parkinson's disease. We never really thought much about it because ... well ... we were kids, and everyone gets taken care of, right? Especially a good kid like George.

Somewhere around 1987 or '88, I had met Mary in college and we'd started dating. We were walking around downtown Eugene, Oregon and all of a sudden Mary got this panicked look on her face and yelled, "Look out!" I looked up and here's this guy running toward us waving his arms. It was George, running up to give me a hug. Scared Mary half to death though! Of course I introduced him to Mary and we talked for a bit. Then I asked him, "What have you been up to?" He said, "Oh, I'm homeless right now." I said, "What do you mean? Like living on the streets homeless?" He said, "Yeah, mostly." I was shocked, I was angry, I was sad, and all I could think was, "How did this happen?"

"How did this happen?" is what our scripture lesson is all about this morning. Jesus and his disciples were out walking one day and came across an unnamed man who was blind from birth. The disciples asked Jesus, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" In other words, "How did this happen?" Whose fault is this? The common belief back then was that sin is the cause of every bad thing that happens. If good things are happening to you, then you must be a good person who doesn't sin. If bad things are happening to you, then you must be a bad person who does sin. I've got to be careful here, because it's clear by the disciples' reaction that the "bad" thing in this story is that this man is blind, which is an issue for persons who *are* blind. "What, are you saying I'm bad because I'm blind?" Well, as we dig deeper into this story, "blind" has very little to do with visual impairment. What the disciples wanted to know is, who sinned? How did this happen? Why did this happen? Was it his fault or his parents' fault? Whose *sin* caused this man's blindness? Oh, so this is about sin

then, right? No. It's not even really about *sin*. Jesus said, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him." Well that doesn't sound good either. That makes it sound like God *caused* this man to be born blind to serve as some sort of object lesson. That's not the case either. Jesus was simply trying to help the disciples understand that he is the light in this world that has been overcome with darkness and he was about to explain how this works.

So Jesus spat in the dirt to make mud, which is not unusual. That's what vocational healers would often do in those days. Jesus spread the mud over the man's eyes and told him to go wash the mud off in the Pool of Siloam. When the man returned, he was healed. This all took place on the Sabbath by the way. Sabbath was supposed to be a day of rest. According to the strictest interpretation of the Law of Moses, Jesus was *not* supposed to be healing people on the Sabbath. So of course, the Pharisees who bore witness to this miracle had issues. They were the interpreters and keepers of the Law, and according to them, Jesus was *not* of God because he broke one of the most important Laws. Jesus did not keep the Sabbath and therefore was a sinner. But there were others in that crowd, including other Pharisees who were saying, "Hold on there, how can a man who is a sinner perform this kind of miracle? He's got to be of God." John writes, "And they were divided." Sound familiar?

So then the folks who were gathered turned their attention on the blind man. "What do you think about Jesus? You're the one he healed." The guy said, "Listen, all I know is that I wasn't able to see, then Jesus came along and now I can see. It's not that complicated." But these people *wanted* to make it complicated because ... you know ... we've got to figure out who to blame here. That's when the guy's parents got dragged into this mess. You might be thinking, "Why would that happen? What do his parents have to do with any of this?" But remember what the disciples asked – "Who sinned? This man or his parents?" That was a legitimate question for people who were tied up in this sick and twisted notion that a person's affliction might be the result of some sin the parents committed. They said, "Why are you asking us? He's an adult.

Ask him.” And the only reason they said this was because they were afraid that the Jews were going to kick them out of the synagogue if they looked like they had any ties to Jesus. Pretty soon people were getting driven out, dismissed and disfellowshipped and no one was dealing with the issue on the table which was, “How did this happen? Why is this man blind?”

Well, we may not be able to see the *why* concerning his blindness, but we sure can definitely see the *result* of it. The *result* of his blindness is rejection from his community. But he was *healed*, that’s a good thing, right? The result of this healing *should* have been acceptance back into the community, but the community rejected the miracle in favor of keeping the religious and social status quo. This story is not about sin. It’s about God at work within humanity’s blindness. Everybody wanted to connect blindness with sin. Why? Because we humans are obsessed with shame and blame. We would rather put the blame on a person’s individual sin than address the sin of the systems that created the situation in the first place.

Case in point – my friend George. The man who would give you the shirt off his back. The man who sang John Denver songs off key and who would clobber us in Milton Bradley’s *The Game of Life*. The man who despite all the trouble and trauma that was taking place in his life would, with no judgment or malice, listen to your trauma. How the hell did this happen? And why the hell are there people in this world who claim to be religious who are more offended that I said “hell” from the pulpit than they are that this young man was living on the street? This man who did *nothing* to deserve this. We’re like these people in our scripture lesson this morning – “And they were divided.” Divided to the point where they wouldn’t even address the *real* issue on the table that day. This story is not about someone who can’t see. This story is not even about the miracle that healed him. This story is not about sin ... it’s not about who didn’t put enough coins in the money jar at the temple or who pulled their donkey out of the ditch on the Sabbath. Don’t get

me wrong – It *is* about sin, and it *is* about blindness, but we want to make it about what *we* think “sin” and “blindness” is.

Think about how often we do this today. “Oh, look at all these homeless people littering our streets. Don’t tell me how we should help them. They’re suffering because of the poor life-choices they made. They’re just getting what they deserve.” Really? Because I’m *still* trying to figure out what kind of poor choices George made to wind up in the situation he was in. And just like the disciples or the Pharisees in this story, we’ll say, “Well, it’s the parents’ fault. It’s *their* poor choices ... *their* sin that put George in this position.” Okay, but there could have been circumstances that none of us were aware of. Maybe the parents were physically unable to do anything to help their son. Maybe they didn’t have access to resources. Or maybe they didn’t have the wherewithal to know where to even start to get resources. I don’t know. Maybe their actions are the result of some trauma in their lives that they’ve experienced that I just don’t know about. Again ... let’s set aside, “Whose fault” this is and “Who sinned” and stay focused on the solution rather than the problem.

Jesus came to be light in a world bathed in darkness. He came to expose evil. He came to restore us and to encourage us to focus on what really matters. He came to heal us all from our spiritual blindness. We’ve been talking about how the path to spiritual growth involves letting go. Letting go of what keeps us from establishing and maintaining a relationship with God. Letting go of what we think this should look like. Letting go of the belief that God’s love is conditional and that it’s all about doing the right religious rituals in order to win God’s favor. Holding on to these things are like putting spiritual blinders on. But by letting go, we allow God’s healing power to take away our blindness. This we know because we have so many examples of stories and teachings about Jesus’ healing power right here in our scriptures. Let the light of scripture, let the light of Christ, let the light and power of the Holy Spirit open your hearts to receive God’s healing.