

## Surely We Aren't Blind, Are We?

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### John 9:1-41

<sup>9</sup> As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. <sup>2</sup>His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” <sup>3</sup>Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. <sup>4</sup>We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. <sup>5</sup>As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” <sup>6</sup>When [Jesus] had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the [blind] man’s eyes, <sup>7</sup>saying to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). Then [the man] went and washed and came back able to see.

<sup>8</sup>The 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?” <sup>9</sup>Some were saying, “It is he.” Others were saying, “No, but it is someone like him.” He kept saying, “I am the man.” <sup>10</sup>But they kept asking him, “Then how were your eyes opened?” <sup>11</sup>He 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.” <sup>12</sup>They said to him, “Where is he?” He said, “I do not know.”

<sup>13</sup>They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. <sup>14</sup>Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. <sup>15</sup>Then 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.” <sup>16</sup>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. <sup>17</sup>So 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.” <sup>18</sup>The 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 <sup>19</sup>and asked them, “Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?” <sup>20</sup>His parents answered, “We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; <sup>21</sup>but 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.” <sup>22</sup>His 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. <sup>23</sup>Therefore his parents said, “He is of age; ask him.” <sup>24</sup>So 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.” <sup>25</sup>He answered, “I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.” <sup>26</sup>They said to him, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?” <sup>27</sup>He 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?” <sup>28</sup>Then they reviled him, saying, “You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. <sup>29</sup>We know that God has

spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.” <sup>30</sup>The man answered, “Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. <sup>31</sup>We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. <sup>32</sup>Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. <sup>33</sup>If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.” <sup>34</sup>They answered him, “You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?” And they drove him out.

<sup>35</sup>Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” <sup>36</sup>He answered, “And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.” <sup>37</sup>Jesus said to him, “You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.” <sup>38</sup>He said, “Lord, I believe.” And he worshiped him.

<sup>39</sup>Jesus 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.” <sup>40</sup>Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, “Surely we are not blind, are we?” <sup>41</sup>Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.

I remember coming home from college for winter break and sitting in the kitchen talking with my mom. She asked if I’d like a cup of hot tea. Sure, I said. So she got up and she proceeded to pull out two mugs, add a tea bag to each, fill them with water, and stick them in the microwave.

Horrified, I said, “That’s not how you make tea.”

She looked at me, unimpressed with my tone and said, “oh really? How do you do it?”

I proceeded to tell her that you heat the water and then once the water is hot, add the tea bag to steep.

“Well,” she said, opening the microwave, handing me a mug of tea, and giving me a look. “I guess there is more than one to make tea.”

Perhaps there is more than one way to do something.

I was listening to the arguments to the Supreme Court a couple weeks ago about the Biden administration’s use of the HEROES Act to eliminate student loan debt. And I was struck by the diversity of arguments the the justices are weighing in the case. Is it a case about who has standing to bring a case before the Supreme Court?

Is it a case about the a balance of power between Congress and the President?  
Is it a case about fairness to all citizens, not favoring one set of people over another?  
Is it a case about predatory lending and crippling debt?  
Is it a case about making responsible financial choices?  
Is it a case about emergency provisions under the law and what constitutes an emergency?

Maybe there is more than one way to understand something.

A mother tells a story of her son coming home from kindergarten to report that at school that day they had communion. Puzzled, since her child attends public school, the mother probed. "Oh really, what did you do?"

Her son answered, "Our class baked bread. And then we shared with with the other class."

Maybe there is more than one way to see something.

Throughout this morning's gospel story the pharisees are clear and decisive. They don't believe that Jesus has the power to heal. And even if he did, it would be sinful to work on the sabbath, so he must not be from God. But at the end of the story as they hear Jesus say that he has come to give sight to those who do not see, there is the slightest crack in their resolve. "Surely we are not blind, are we?," they ask. "Surely we are not blind....are we?"

That question haunts me. And honestly, I hope it haunts you, too. It's haunting because I know how that feels to move from certainty to doubt. That moment when your stomach clenches, the assuredness slips, and the thought emerges, "What if I'm wrong?"

"Surely we are not blind...are we?"

When Jesus talks about blindness in John's gospel, it isn't about literal sight. To be sure, Jesus heals this man, offers him literal sight, but what Jesus impresses upon him, the crowds, the pharisees, his disciples, is spiritual sight. Spiritual understanding. In fact, this idea of Jesus as one who heals blindness becomes a defining image of Jesus' mission as a whole.<sup>1</sup> Jesus is here to correct our vision, to restore our sight, to help us

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene Boring and Fred Craddock, The People's New Testament Commentary. p. 318.

see the world as God created it to be. To see and understand that Jesus is Lord and his way offers salvation, healing, abundant life.

There is a condition of sight in which it becomes increasingly difficult to see what's right in front of you. The Mayo Clinic says it is "a natural, often annoying part of aging." Do you know what it is called, this condition that makes it difficult to see what's right in front of you? Presbyopia.

Surely we are not blind, are we?

In this story, the pharisees miss what is right in front of them. They can't see who Jesus is because they are trying to see him in their own terms.<sup>2</sup>

He can't be from God, for he does not observe the sabbath.

He can't be from God, he is a sinner.

They can't see because they can't get outside of their own frame of mind.

We humans do that all the time. We see the world our own terms, from our own frames.

This happened here last spring during the listening campaign for Long Range Planning. You'll remember that we hosted listening sessions for all kinds of groups in the church so we could get a good cross-section of experiences: We had a session for young adults, and one for anyone who has ever served as an elder or deacon. We had a session during the adult education hour and a session for families with young kids. We had a session on Zoom and a session after church that any one could come to. We had a session with the youth. We tried to be as inclusive as we could to ensure that everyone who wanted was able to be heard.

When the listening session schedule came out, we had from a handful of folks who felt concerned and excluded that we weren't holding a session for those who are 55 and older.

At the time I remember thinking that folks were seeing the world from their own frames. They saw other age groups targeted and wondered why theirs wasn't. It didn't matter that they had other ways in, other applicable sessions where their voices and opinions would be heard, only that their age group wasn't named.

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<sup>2</sup> *ibid*, p. 319.

These many months later, I have to admit that at the time, I didn't see and appreciate that among folks in our congregation in the 55 and older demographic, there is a particular spiritual hunger that needs attention. I, too, was operating under my own frame, on my own terms, and I failed, initially, to see.

"Surely we aren't blind... are we?"

We view "others" in our own frames, in our own terms, particularly ones we deem to be in need. And we make value judgments about them without understanding much at all about their circumstances.

"Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

As if his blindness was the result of moral failing and God's judgement, rather than a physical characteristic.

As if begging was his fault and God's judgment, rather than the result of a complex set of factors in his life and the choices made by his society.

- Who sinned, this child or his parents, that there are more kids in the house than food in the fridge?
- Who sinned, this woman or her parents, that she is addicted to opioids?
- Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he crossed the US border illegally to work?
- Who sinned, this woman or her parents, that she has \$100k in college debt or astronomical hospital bills or an underwater mortgage?
- Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was stopped by the police for a traffic stop and then beaten almost to death?

We see folks in our own frames and then trap them in our value judgments.

Surely we aren't blind, are we?

Pastor Bruce Reyes Chow notes that when we see from our own frames and make judgements about others, we then — often trying to be good church people — we rush in to diagnose and treat before we understand anything about the nature and depth of the problems we are trying to address.

Mike Mather is a pastor who has spent his career serving communities of people living well below the poverty line. He laments the number of well-meaning folks who have come into his communities to try to solve the community's problems for them. They will come in to the neighborhood, Mike recounts, and because the people here are poor, they will offer them budgeting classes before they've even had a conversation with

anyone. And if they did have a conversation, they would learn that Brenda doesn't need a budgeting class. She knows how to make a dollar stretch further than I ever will. She just simply doesn't have enough dollars.

Or, Mike says, well-meaning folks will want to set up a meal program and serve food out of the church. Obviously serving food to hungry people is good. But what they don't know, Mike says, is that Larry is a master chef, but he's also a returning citizen, and hasn't been able to find work as a result. What they don't know is that Louisa dreams of having her own catering company but doesn't have access to a commercial kitchen to make that a reality.

There is tremendous abundance in this community, Mike will say. And all folks can see is poverty.

"Surely we aren't blind, are we?"

This story of the healing of the man born blind is full of examples of our human propensity to ask "who sinned?" — to make assumptions, find fault, and make value judgments on others we don't fully understand.

And, if I understand the text, this story teaches us that Jesus has come into the world to correct our vision, to challenge our assumptions.

This story teaches us that Jesus has come into the world to help us see the world and each other as God created us to be, to set aside our own frames and value judgements. Not asking, "who sinned?" but, "how can we heal and help?"<sup>3</sup>

This story teaches us that Jesus has come into the world to show us the way to salvation, healing, abundant life — not just for us, but for everyone, and in particular those who are suffering. Imagine how different the world might be if we could see ourselves and others through the eyes of grace.

And friends, that seeing starts here, in this sanctuary. It starts at this grace we encounter here. We come here full of blind spots and assumptions and missteps and judgments — unworthy.

And yet, here in the waters of baptism the Lord of Mercy says to us, "You are my beloved. Here you may begin again."

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<sup>3</sup> Bruce Reyes Chow for A Sanctified Art, LLC. Lent bundle 2023.

Here at this table the Lord of Life says to us, "Are you hungry? Please eat. Are you thirsty? Please drink."

Here in this community of those who are trying to follow Jesus's way, the Lord invites us to say to one another — without shame — "I'm hurting. I've lost my way. I need help."

Here, the Risen One bids us to look to our neighbors with grace and say, "There is more than enough here. What needs healing? How can we help?"

Friends, Jesus has come to help us to see the ways of salvation, healing, and abundant life. Imagine how different the world might be if we could see ourselves and each others through the eyes of grace.

Surely we will not stay blind, will we?  
Amen.