

Now I See
A Sermon on John 9:1-41
Fourth Sunday in Lent
March 22, 2020

Introduction

We all have a lot of time on our hands these days. The restaurants and bars are closed except for carry out. The theaters and arenas are closed. No sports on TV for the first time in my life. We are staying at home and keeping our social distance from everyone except the members of our immediate family.

That gives us a lot of time for reflection, which is a good thing to be doing during Lent. We can reflect on our relationship with God, our relationship with Christ, where we are on our faith journeys.

Today's text is a reflection by John on how the members of his community came to believe in Christ. It helps them to understand the identity of Christ. It also helps them to understand their own identity.

First Move: An Act of Grace

This is a famous text in New Testament scholarship. It tells us about the historical situation of John's community.

In *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*, one of the most important books written about the Gospel of John in the 20th century, Louis Martyn concludes that the key verse for interpreting the social setting of John's community is 9:22. I translate that verse as follows:

His parents said these things because they were afraid of the Judeans, for already the Judeans had decided that if anyone acknowledges him [as] Christ, they will be put out of the synagogue.

Martyn infers from the phrase, "for already the Judeans had decided", that a formal decision had been made by Jewish authorities before the Gospel of John was written: Jews who confess Jesus as Messiah or Christ must be put out of the synagogue. So the historical situation of John's community is that they are going through a painful transition—they have just been expelled from the synagogue and they felt isolated and alienated. This probably happened in the 90s CE.

This is the guiding light by which we read the story of the blind man and the Pharisees. It is a story taking place on two levels. The first level is the historical

Jesus. There were many stories about Jesus' healing blind men floating around in the tradition. One of those stories could be the basis for this story. The second level is the time that John is writing the Gospel for his community. He uses these stories from the tradition as the basis for a new narrative that he crafts to comfort the members of his community with the suffering they are going through.

The first seven verses describe the miracle itself. Jesus is in Jerusalem. He sees a man who is blind from birth. The man does not ask to be healed. He says nothing to Jesus.

The miracle is interrupted by a dialogue between Jesus and his disciples. The disciples ask Jesus, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he might be born blind?" Sin is one of the themes of this chapter; a form of the Greek word for sin appears nine times.

The disciples are stating the traditional Jewish belief that sickness is caused by sin. The narrator tells us that the man was born blind. How could he have sinned? It could be punishment for the sin of his parents. Several times in the Old Testament God punishes the next generation for the sins of their fathers.

Jesus says, "Neither. He was born blind in order that the deeds of God might be revealed in him." Jesus doesn't say anything about what caused the man to be born blind. He sees this as an opportunity to do the works of God, which is to relieve suffering. The work of God is not punishing sinners but overcoming suffering. John is not concerned about how darkness came into the world. He only cares that Jesus is the light who came into the world to dispel darkness.

Then the healing begins. As Gail O'Day, a UCC scholar, notes, the gift of sight is freely given by Jesus, without any response of faith by the blind man. The healing is an act of grace. Jesus demonstrates what it means to do the works of God. Jesus spits on the ground, makes mud from the spit and smears it on the eyes of the blind man. He tells the man, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam." Jerusalem is close to the Dead Sea, where the mud has a high mineral content. Mud from the Dead Sea still today is believed to have medicinal and cleansing properties. It is a beauty product sold all over the world.

The miracle takes place when the man goes offstage. He has to show faith to go and wash in the pool of Siloam in order to be healed. This is similar to a healing by the prophet Elisha in 2 Kings 5, when he told Naaman, a Syrian general, to go wash in the Jordan River to cure himself of leprosy.

Jesus does not appear in the next 30 verses. It is his longest time that Jesus is offstage in the Gospel of John. This may reflect the absence that John's community felt.

Second Move: Different Responses to Jesus

The healing of the blind man affects not only the blind man, but also the people he comes in contact with. It provokes different responses from different groups of people.

The blind man's faith progresses while Jesus is away. When the blind man is questioned by his neighbors, he refers to this man called Jesus. When he is interrogated by the Pharisees, he calls him a prophet. When he is interrogated a second time, by the Judeans, he says that Jesus is from God. At the end of the story, he says, "I believe" and bows down before Jesus.

The author crafts a series of dialogues to show differing responses to Jesus. It is a hallmark of Greek storytelling that only two characters or two sets of characters can be on the stage at one time. The response to the miracle takes place in four dialogues: (1) the healed blind man and his neighbors, (2) the man and the Pharisees, (3) the Judeans and the blind man's parents, and (4) another encounter between the healed man and the Jews/Pharisees.

The neighbors likely represent fellow members of the synagogue. They are divided in their opinions about the healing, just as they are divided in their opinions about Jesus. When the blind man comes back, seeing, they question each other about the identity of the beggar. Is this the same man who was sitting and begging earlier? The gift of sight to a man born blind is a radical gift; those who are confronted by it look for logical ways to explain it. Some deny it is the same man. They are questioning whether a miracle took place. They approach the blind man and ask him to explain what happened. Then they ask where Jesus is. The blind man does not know. This reinforces Jesus' absence from the story.

The neighbors take the man to the Pharisees. They hope that the religious authorities can determine what happened. The Pharisees begin interrogating the blind man and reintroduce the theme of sin. Their focus is on the identity of Jesus instead of how he accomplished the miracle. The Pharisees also are divided in their opinions. Some say, "This man is not from God for he does not keep the Sabbath." They accuse Jesus of working on the Sabbath by mixing mud or clay. Kneading clay was one of the activities that was expressly forbidden on the Sabbath. They minimize the healing miracle and focus on the violation of the law. Others ask how a sinner is able to do such signs? There is a schism amongst the Pharisees.

Then the Judeans take over and begin interrogating his parents. The Greek word Ἰουδαῖοι can be translated either Jews or Judeans. I think it is more historically accurate to translate it as Judeans. A New Testament scholar, Wayne Meeks, says that the followers of Jesus came to see themselves as Galileans instead of as Judeans.

Raymond Brown, another New Testament scholar, believes that the Samaritan woman at the well, whom Mary preached about last week, represents a community of Samaritans who came into John's community. Samaritans and Judeans had been enemies for centuries, and John's community picked up this enmity.

Judeans and Pharisees appear to be interchangeable in this story. The Judeans may represent the rabbis, who had come to be the dominant group in Judaism by the time that John's gospel was written. The Pharisees were still a group in Judaism at that time, but they were more prominent in Jesus' day. This may be another example of telling the story on two levels: the term *Pharisees* locates events in the past, in the time of the historical Jesus, while the term *Judeans* gives the events contemporary relevance to John's community.

The Judeans do not believe there was a miracle; they do not believe that the man was born blind. They start gathering evidence to prove that it was a hoax. They ask the parents whether the blind man is their son, whether he was born blind and how he sees now. This is the third time that this question has been asked. It shows the lengths people will go to deny the truth when it is uncomfortable. The Judeans have heard the answer already, but they refuse to accept it.

The parents answer cautiously. He is our son and he was born blind. More than that we do not know. He is of legal age; go ask him.

John is critical throughout his gospel about people who waver in faith and are afraid to confess openly that Jesus is the Christ. They are represented by Nicodemus, who comes to Jesus at night and goes away confused. John shows the parents in a dark light. They protect themselves and betray their son by telling the authorities to ask their son for themselves.

The key verse that we talked about earlier takes place in the context of this dialogue between the parents and the Judeans. The parents "were afraid of the Judeans, for already the Judeans had decided that if anyone might acknowledge him [as] Christ, they would be put out of the synagogue." The parents are frightened because they know that their son was healed by Jesus and that they will be expelled from the synagogue if they praise Jesus or confess he is the Messiah.

Then *they* summon the blind man a second time. *They* could mean the Pharisees or the Judeans. They interrogate the blind man. "Give glory to God; we *know* that this man Jesus is a sinner." Give glory to God is an Old Testament way of saying, confess your sins and tell us the truth.

The Greek verb, οἶδα, has a double meaning. It means both know and see. The author uses οἶδα nine times in today's text. He wants to make a connection between knowledge and sight.

Unlike the Pharisees and Judeans, the blind man is willing to say what he does not know. “Whether he is a sinner, I do not know.” He is still working through his understanding of Jesus. The blind man stands firmly behind what he does know from his own experience: “One [thing] I know, that I was blind and now I see.” That is a familiar verse from *Amazing Grace*: I was blind and now I see.

The Judeans say, “How did he open your eyes?” The blind man is exasperated. “I’ve already told you three times. You don’t listen.” Then he gets short with them. “Why do you want me to tell you again? Do you want to become his disciples?”

This infuriates the Judeans. “We are disciples of Moses, not of this man.” They call Jesus *this man* instead of referring to him by name. They say they do not know where *this man* is from. They assume that Jesus’ origin is a matter of geography. They do not know that Jesus’ true origin is from above.

The confrontation with the Judeans and the Pharisees is helping the blind man to understand Jesus’ true origin. Sight depends upon seeing with the eyes of faith. “You deny that he is from God and wonder where he is from.” The healing makes sense to the blind man only if Jesus is from God. “Yet the amazing thing is that he opened my eyes.” The blind man uses the Pharisees’ logic against them: “We know that God does not listen to sinners, but God does listen to those who fear God and do the will of God.”

The blind man can see now that a new age is breaking in through Jesus. “In this age, it is unheard of for anyone to open the eyes of who has been born blind. Jesus must be from God.” The blind repeats Jesus’ words from the beginning of the story that his blindness would be an occasion to reveal the works of God.

The Judeans are shocked at the insolence of the blind man. “You were born wholly in sin, and you are teaching us?” They still have the traditional understanding of disease as punishment for sin. They are so certain that they know that they close themselves off to what is taking place before them. The Judeans cast him out, just as they cast out of the synagogue anyone who confessed that Jesus was the Christ.

Jesus returns to the story when he hears that the Judeans cast out the blind man. He asks the blind man to make a confession of faith. “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” Apocalyptic Jewish texts described the Son of Man as a supernatural being who comes down from heaven to judge all people and rule the world as a human being. The blind man explores further. “And who is he, Lord, that I might believe in him?” Jesus says, “I am.” This is a God statement. Only God says, “I am.” John’s community believes that Jesus was sent from God and descended to earth from heaven. Jesus says that he is the Son of Man who has already descended. The blind man says, “I believe” and bows down to him.

The blind man is a model for faith. His faith progresses and he stands up to the Pharisees and Judeans. It is similar to the way that Jesus handles himself before the high priest during his Passion. Jesus can be absent for 30 verses because his role is taken over by the blind man.

Third Move: Feeling the Presence of Jesus

David Rensberger, a Mennonite scholar, believes that John is encouraging his community to fully commit themselves to Christ. John scorns those people whose faith is soft, like the parents who afraid to say anything about Jesus to the authorities. The blind man deepens his faith while Jesus is offstage. His faith grows through confrontation with the Pharisees and the Judeans. He has been healed by Jesus, and he defends Jesus against skeptical authorities.

Reading the story on two levels helps us focus on two questions: the identity of Jesus and the identity of ourselves. Who am I? Someone who has been touched by Christ. I was blind. Now I see.

Many of us have had long periods in our lives when we thought Jesus was absent. Then we are touched by grace, just as the blind man was.

Sometimes we are touched by grace while we are in the midst of suffering. I heard many call stories in seminary. It is remarkable how many calls are in response to death. We are thrown off balance by the death of someone close to us. We are searching to find meaning. In the midst of our struggle, Jesus finds us.

The gospels are stories about us as much as they are stories about Jesus. The gospel writers take sacred stories from their traditions and apply them to the contexts in which their communities were living. They make sense of the trauma their communities were experiencing by returning to the sacred stories.

God is mysterious. Jesus is an enigma. The gospels are filled with stories of people who a hard time understanding God and Jesus. We have a hard time understanding ourselves, too. The stories about God and Jesus help us see ourselves in our best light. They reflect our highest ideals.

One of our challenges during Lent is to reflect on our own faith journey. What kind of a narrative can you make about your journey? Is there a story there? Have you set your face like flint on following Jesus?

When I am preparing for a funeral, I see part of my task as telling the story of the dearly departed. I always mention their baptism. I want to tell the story of their faith journey. Life is not just one damned thing after another. Our lives have meaning and purpose if we tend to our relationship with the sacred in our midst.

This time of worry and doubt can be a time for tending to our relationship with the sacred. There are no guidelines about staying inside all day. We can still spend time in the garden or in the park, taking in the beauty that surrounds us. We now have time to pay attention to God's creation and meditate on it.

We can also get closer to the creatures in God's creation. Social distancing does not have to mean living in isolation. We still have telephones. We can even practice the lost art of writing cards and letters. We can check in on each other. Lindsey, Laura and Sarah have volunteered to shop for groceries and run errands for high-risk people who need to stay inside.

We can do more with our families. We now have time to cook together and relax together, to go on walks together or ride bikes. We have more time simply to enjoy each other.

Jesus is physically absent today, just as he was in John's day. Jesus becomes inescapably present to us when we read the gospel stories. We can now set aside time each day for reading the Bible. Jesus becomes present through the words of a sermon. We can still listen to worship podcasts even when we cannot physically go to church.

Conclusion

If we are open to Jesus' presence among us, we won't be as concerned with how darkness came into the world. We won't blame the Chinese for bringing Coronavirus into the world.

We won't feel isolated in this time of social distancing. Instead we will look for the light breaking into the darkness.

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