

JESUS CREATES A WAY WHEN THERE IS NO WAY

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JOHN 9:1-23 NRSV

¹As 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."

(The story of the healing of the blind man continues through John 9:41)



There's a restaurant in Zurich, Switzerland called "The Blind Cow." All of the workers are either blind or visually impaired in some way. In the late 1990s, the restaurant owners were inspired by a blind Swiss pastor named Jurg Spielman. Spielman routinely blindfolded the dinner guests who came to his house. He said they paid more attention to the food that way, and they also listened to each other better. At the Blind Cow, people are first taken to a softly lit lounge where they check their belongings and place their orders. Then a blind host guides them to their seats in the pitch-black dining room. They can hear all of the usual sounds of a busy restaurant without seeing who is making any of them. The waitstaff wear bells on their shoes so that people know they are coming.

The restaurant bills itself as a culinary adventure, with customers using only four of their five senses. The website asks: Can you tell the difference between red wine and white? And even more importantly, can you maneuver the food on your fork to your lips without making a mess? Clearly, a restaurant like this works only if customers have a sense of playfulness, and only if they're able to trust the person who is guiding them. Short of that trust, it probably wouldn't work.

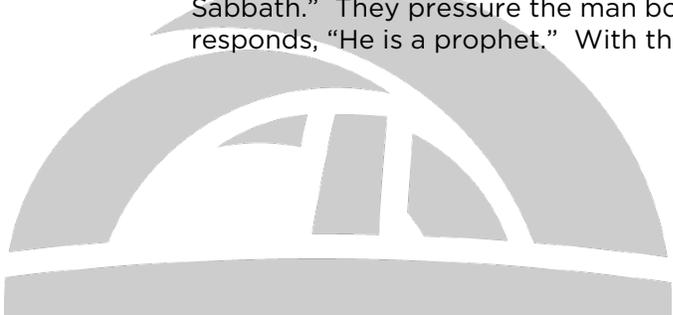
In our reading for today, Jesus heals a man who's been blind since birth. As is typical of the day, those with handicaps are pushed to the margins of society. They're forced to support themselves by begging. Then Jesus shows up and things change. The healing is described in simple terms. After proclaiming himself as the light of the world, Jesus spits on the ground, mixes some mud, puts it on the man's eyes, and tells him to wash in the pool of Siloam. The man does as he's told, and miraculously he comes back able to see.

You can imagine this being the best day of the man's life, and maybe it is, but he will soon find himself caught in a nightmare. And then, much like a visit to the Blind Cow, he's going to have to learn to trust the person who's guiding him, or it probably won't work.

By the time the man gets back from the pool, Jesus is gone. But his neighbors are there. They get into a squabble. *Who opened your eyes?* Some of the neighbors are convinced he is the man who was formerly blind, but others aren't buying it. In response to the swirling controversy, the man states plainly, "I am the man." But despite his testimony, the neighbors have trouble believing him.

I wonder if some early "confirmation bias" might have been at work. If you don't know what confirmation bias is, it's our tendency to believe what confirms our preconceived ideas of the world around us. For instance, if you believe in conspiracy theories, then you're likely to spot a conspiracy a mile away. If you believe that vaccines do more harm than good, then you'll go looking for evidence that supports your view. If you believe that a man born blind cannot possibly receive the gift of sight, then you'll say, "It can't be him, but only looks like him."

The nightmare is just starting. In the process, the man who was formerly blind proves to be a scrapper. The neighbors bring him to the Pharisees. They want to hear the story too. *What happened?* He responds: "The man named Jesus put mud on my eyes. Then I washed. And now I see." Only there's a problem - a simmering controversy between Jesus and the religious leaders. On top of that, the healing occurs on the Sabbath. The Pharisees grumble. More confirmation bias: "This man cannot be from God for he does not keep the Sabbath." They pressure the man born blind, "What do you say about Jesus?" He responds, "He is a prophet." With this simple testimony, the man connects himself with





Jesus. He's just beginning a journey of faith, but he's seeing things that he could not see before.

The religious leaders refuse to believe that the man was ever blind in the first place. There are always charlatans willing to peddle something for a buck. So the leaders talk to the man's parents. Now, you'd think the parents would be overjoyed about their son's good fortune, but they're not. If anything, they're defensive. "Yes, he is our son. Yes, he was born blind. But how this happened to him, we do not know. He is of age. He can speak for himself."

That's a troubling response. Why aren't the parents supporting him? Before we come down too hard on them, perhaps those of us who are parents should reflect on times when we've done something similar, when we've drawn a line in the sand and said to our children, "Whatever you do, don't cross this line."

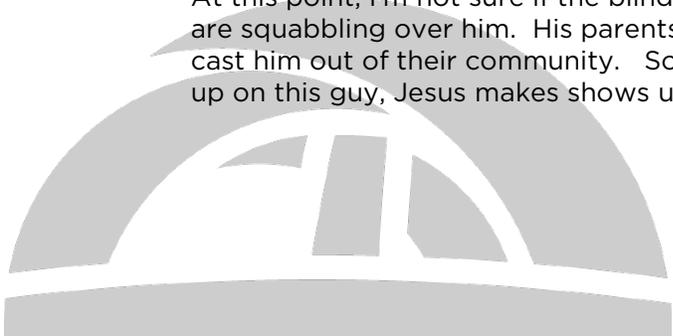
When my son Erik was a high school senior, I took him to visit my alma mater: Concordia College in Moorhead. He said he wanted to major in philosophy. I was definitely not in favor of the idea. The Concordia professor we met with seemed to be making the case for me: "Philosophy is a great major, but you need to know that you won't find a job in your field." The next day we visited St. Olaf. The St. Olaf professor could not have been more encouraging about getting a philosophy degree, and about all the avenues it would open up for my son. So much for carefully drawing a line in the sand. Erik chose St. Olaf. And he majored in philosophy.

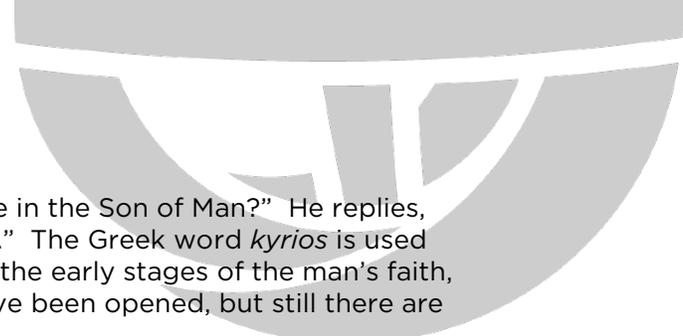
There's a lot at stake for parents and children in these sorts of decisions. We soon discover what was at stake in Jesus' day. The religious leaders had announced that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah was to be cast out of the synagogue. Jesus was trouble. The tension was just beginning during Jesus' ministry, but by the time John's gospel was written, it was alarming. There was a steep cost to following Jesus. The synagogue was the center of their faith and life. If you were cast out, you would give up your place of worship; you would lose your friends, your family, and even your identity as a child of Abraham and Sarah. In short, you would become a social pariah.

The Pharisees leave the parents and resume their interrogation of the man born blind. They demand to know: "How did this happen? Jesus is a sinner. He cannot possibly have done this." Their questions remind me of that definition of insanity in which you do things over and over again, but expect different results. But in this case, the results stay the same. The man born blind continues to be a scrapper. He says, "I don't know if he's a sinner or not. All I know is that I was blind, and now I can see." And then the man goes way out on a limb: "Why do you want to hear it again. Do you also want to become his disciples?"

The Pharisees are livid: "We know God spoke through Moses, but as for this man, we don't even know where he comes from." Once again the question of Jesus' origin arises. In John's gospel, there's only one answer to that question: Jesus comes from God. But the fact of the matter is, a person's eyes have to be opened in order to see it. The religious leaders cannot and will not entertain the idea. They're tired of getting lectured by a two-bit, blind beggar who never went to school a day in his life. And so they do the very thing they've been threatening: they cast him out. And he's alone.

At this point, I'm not sure if the blind man's nightmare could get any worse. The neighbors are squabbling over him. His parents have disowned him. And the religious leaders have cast him out of their community. So now what? Just about the time we're ready to give up on this guy, Jesus makes shows up. As the Good Shepherd, he goes in search of one





little lost sheep. Jesus tenderly asks him, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” He replies, “And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.” The Greek word *kyrios* is used here. It can be translated either “sir” or “lord,” but given the early stages of the man’s faith, “sir” seems like a better fit. Physically the man’s eyes have been opened, but still there are many things he cannot see.

So, why does Jesus refer to himself as the “Son of Man?” Jesus uses this title throughout John. It comes from the book of Daniel where there is one called the Ancient of Days. The Ancient One is set apart from all the other heavenly creatures. Only the Son of Man can approach him. He gives authority to the Son of Man, and so – as John tells his story – Jesus comes down from above. That is his origin and identity. And subsequently, when Jesus tells the man born blind that he is the Son of Man, he’s revealing himself to the man and inviting him to become his disciple. The man replies, “*Kyrios*, I believe.” Only this time he doesn’t mean “sir” but “Lord.” *Lord, I believe.* And he worships him.

The man born blind has been on an incredible journey, even if it’s been something of a nightmare. It’s hard to say what the highpoint is – is it the gift of physical sight, or spiritual sight, or maybe both? In both instances, Jesus comes to the man, and creates a way for him when there is no way. And as with the Blind Cow restaurant in Zurich, the man wouldn’t have ended up where he did if he could not trust the one who was walking beside him.

A story like this is important because it reminds us that the journey of discipleship is not easy. Sticking up for your values and beliefs is not easy. Testifying openly that you are a disciple of Jesus is not easy. It comes with a cost. Jesus tells us, “I am the light of the world.” We need that light. We need Jesus to give us the gift of sight in whatever way seems best to him. We need him to come to us, and create a way when there is no way.

In the early 20th century, a Frenchman named Jacques Lusseyran wrote a memoir entitled *And There Was Light*. Lusseyran had experienced a freak accident at the age of 7. He later wrote about it in his memoir: “I had completely lost the sight of my eyes; I could not see the light of the world anymore. Yet the light was still there.” Even when Lusseyran spent time in a Nazi concentration camp, he clung to the belief that the source of light is not in the outer world. [Rather,] light dwells where life also dwells: within ourselves.”

As followers of Jesus, we cling to the light and life he offers. It’s inside of us. It allows us to see. We cannot live without it. Amen.

