

John 9 (NIV)

¹ As (Jesus) went along, he saw a man blind from birth. ² His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

³ “Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus, “but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him. ⁴ As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. ⁵ While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.”

⁶ After saying this, he spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man’s eyes. ⁷ “Go,” he told him, “wash in the Pool of Siloam” (this word means “Sent”). So the man went and washed, and came home seeing.

⁸ His neighbors and those who had formerly seen him begging asked, “Isn’t this the same man who used to sit and beg?” ⁹ Some claimed that he was.

Others said, “No, he only looks like him.”

But he himself insisted, “I am the man.”

¹⁰ “How then were your eyes opened?” they asked.

¹¹ He replied, “The man they call Jesus made some mud and put it on my eyes. He told me to go to Siloam and wash. So I went and washed, and then I could see.”

¹² “Where is this man?” they asked him.

“I don’t know,” he said.

¹³ They brought to the Pharisees the man who had been blind. ¹⁴ Now the day on which Jesus had made the mud and opened the man’s eyes was a Sabbath. ¹⁵ Therefore the Pharisees also asked him how he had received his sight. “He put mud on my eyes,” the man replied, “and I washed, and now I see.”

¹⁶ Some of the Pharisees said, “This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath.”

But others asked, “How can a sinner perform such signs?” So they were divided.

¹⁷ Then they turned again to the blind man, “What have you to say about him? It was your eyes he opened.”

The man replied, “He is a prophet.”

¹⁸ They still did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they sent for the man’s parents. ¹⁹ “Is this your son?” they asked. “Is this the one you say was born blind? How is it that now he can see?”

²⁰ “We know he is our son,” the parents answered, “and we know he was born blind. ²¹ But how he can see now, or who

opened his eyes, we don’t know. Ask him. He is of age; he will speak for himself.” ²² His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders, who already had decided that anyone who acknowledged that Jesus was the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. ²³ That was why his parents said, “He is of age; ask him.”

²⁴ A second time they summoned the man who had been blind. “Give glory to God by telling the truth,” they said. “We know this man is a sinner.”

²⁵ He replied, “Whether he is a sinner or not, I don’t know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!”

²⁶ Then they asked him, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?”

²⁷ He answered, “I have told you already and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples too?”

²⁸ Then they hurled insults at him and said, “You are this fellow’s disciple! We are disciples of Moses! ²⁹ We know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this fellow, we don’t even know where he comes from.”

³⁰ The man answered, “Now that is remarkable! You don’t know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. ³¹ We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly person who does his will. ³² Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. ³³ If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.”

³⁴ To this they replied, “You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!” And they threw him out.

³⁵ Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, and when he found him, he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?”

³⁶ “Who is he, sir?” the man asked. “Tell me so that I may believe in him.”

³⁷ Jesus said, “You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you.”

³⁸ Then the man said, “Lord, I believe,” and he worshiped him.

³⁹ Jesus said, “For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind.”

⁴⁰ Some Pharisees who were with him heard him say this and asked, “What? Are we blind too?”

⁴¹ Jesus said, “If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains.”

Healing from Blindness (John 9)

Well, there is a lot going on in what we read from John chapter 9 today. I just ended up doing a 3 Sunday series on Jesus’ temptation, honestly the same could be done for this passage, and to a good end as Jesus’ healing of this man born blind teaches us about the goodness of God and that we have every reasons to abide in Christ and worship Him. And that’s certainly the case with what I want to highlight about this passage today.

What probably stands out in this passage from the jump is what it starts with, the Disciples' question to Jesus. When they come upon this man blind from birth, they ask Jesus, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

Now, just the question may feel startling to us, or disturbing that of all things this is what the Disciples would ask. But this was the common belief in the Judaism - and frankly most cultures - of Jesus' day: that for anyone to suffer in such a debilitating way - such as with a handicap like blindness - that it must be punishment for some wickedness; that somebody must've done something wrong! And some believed that even an unborn child was capable of sinning: doing something in the womb that could result in them then being punished with a physical disability. So, for the Disciples it's not a question of *whether* sin is to blame here, they just wanna know whodunit: was it this man or his parents whose sin had left him without sight.

But as crazy as this may sound - the way the disciples have framed it - even today we can be susceptible to their logic: that when we experience not just some physical malady, but any suffering or hardship or outright tragedy, our hearts and minds can quickly go to asking, "*What* did I do wrong? Is there something I have done either recently or even long ago that God could be punishing me for?"

But Jesus' answer to this is No. He dismisses this view that was frankly dominant in His day, and can persist even in our hearts, by being clear with His disciples in verse 3 that this man's blindness is not a result of sin, by him *or* his parents. God does not cause suffering or hardship or tragedy in response to our sin. To the contrary, God is grieved and desires to comfort us in any suffering we experience.

Now, all of this is not to say that there aren't consequences that result from our sin. Just take addictive behaviors - whether it's abusing alcohol or drugs or being compulsive with gambling or eating or sexual addiction - those behaviors will bear negative fruit in our lives, and in the lives of our families, no doubt. In fact, we should *expect* any sinful choices we make to lead to suffering, hardship, and in some instances even tragedy, but these are simply the natural result of the sins themselves; they're not punishments brought about by God. To the contrary, God is grieved when we sin, but He intends to love us out of our sin, not to punish us out of it, and He may even spare us from its worst consequences.

But what Jesus teaches His Disciples here also speaks to what nonsense it is when Christians - or anyone - suggests that natural disasters are God punishing societies for some particular immorality: like that hurricane in Haiti being a response to people practicing voodoo, or Katrina was God punishing New Orleans for debauchery; or the Tsunami was a punishment for the people of Thailand, and so on.

But, before moving forward, I want to take this back to the personal application of Jesus' point and invite each of us to reflect for ourselves: is there any difficulty you've experienced in your life - whether long ago in the past or even something that you might

be going through right now- is there anything where you have concluded or at least wondered if maybe it's come about as a punishment from God? I just want to gently take that from you today - or better yet, the gospel writer John and *Jesus Himself* want to free you from that lie - by declaring the truth that God did not cause these things; God is not looking to punish you. Rather, God is like the Father in His Parable of the Prodigal Son: grieved at our decisions, but ready and waiting with open arms for us to turn back to Him & receive His unconditional love.¹ And the assurance of this that comes from Jesus in John 9 today is yet another reminder of God's goodness and that we have every reasons to abide in Christ and worship Him.

Although, it can still be puzzling: what Jesus says *is* going on here. At the end of verse 3, He says, "but this (man's blindness) happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him," which we can take to mean that while God doesn't step in and spare us from all suffering or harm - and He's not happy it happens - but there are ways that God will still bring good about from it like only He can. And that's certainly what happens here.

Just think of the impact this particular healing - of this man born blind - has not just on this man personally, but on the millions and millions who have read this chapter of John ever since and learned about God and life with Him.

So, as part of those millions, what else might Jesus be teaching or revealing to us through this man's life? Well, over the past two millenia the Church has almost universally understood this man's physical blindness to be a picture of our human condition apart from Christ, of the spiritual darkness and blindness we were born with and are living in [it's no coincidence that He was not just blind, but blind from *birth*]. And it's fascinating how (further down²) this man himself will say to the Pharisees - the religious leaders who are skeptical - (in v 32) that of all the miracles in the Old Testament leading up to the time of Christ, God had never healed anyone of blindness.³ God had done all sorts of miracles, but never healing blindness, as if to emphasize - to *save it* - to show physically what is true about Jesus spiritually: that He is the light of the world! And Jesus is the light of the world because only in Jesus' character do we fully see what God is really like, only through Jesus' teaching & crucifixion can we learn the true reality of our sin from its root to its consequences, and only by Christ's Spirit with & in us can we find the means to overcome our sins and live more fully in the light. And so, by Jesus healing this man from blindness we're given a metaphor for God's goodness - for His incomparable blessing to us - in coming to us, in sending us His Son, and reason for us to seek to abide in Christ and worship Him.

¹ Luke 15:11ff

² In verse 32

³ Though it had been prophesied about the age of the Messiah: Isaiah 35:5-6, 42:7, 61:1

And so, if this man's blindness represents our (natural) human condition, the Church has also recognized that the means by which He is healed represents our baptism, which is the formal beginning of God healing our human condition. First Jesus combines the liquid - the water - of His saliva with dirt and rubs it on the man's eyes. But then, He tells the man to go wash in the pool of Siloam. And the man receives His sight. And what makes Jesus telling him to wash in *this* pool even more fitting as a metaphor for baptism is this particular pool's purpose at the temple. There was at least one other pool on the temple grounds - the Pool of Bethesda - but the Pool of Siloam was actually located just outside of the temple and it was required for the Jews who were on pilgrimage to the temple to do a ritual washing of purifying themselves there before continuing on a road known as the "Pilgrim's Path" that took them into the temple gates: into the Presence of God. For us, Jesus has instituted Baptism as the sacrament to publicly signify our relationship to Him - our relationship with God the Father *through Him* - and that we have become Jesus' disciple. So, through it the Church also acknowledges that - in response to our welcoming Jesus into our lives and making Him Lord - the Holy Spirit of God dwells within us. Now, this is not to say that folks cannot know Jesus or live in His Spirit before being baptized, but formalize our entrance into a life of discipleship with Him.

So, the healing of this man's blindness from birth represents our coming to recognize Jesus as the light of the world, the light of our lives. Though, only the start of that lifelong journey of following and learning from Him. Neurologist Oliver Sacks helpfully reminds us that when someone who is blind is made able to see, there is still plenty of acclimation required. Listen to what he says about those who were born blind have a medical procedure that gives them their sight: what a metaphor this is for the Christian journey of life. Scholar Scott Hozzee summarized Sacks' explanation that such people... "need to have not just their optic hardware repaired but they need to get the necessary mental software installed, too."

The ability to see is one-part a physical phenomenon but also one-part a mental exercise. Functioning as a sighted person requires having access to a long backlog of visual experience. That's why even today blind people who surgically receive the ability to see cannot instantly begin to act like all other seeing persons—they cannot just stroll out of the hospital following surgery. Without having had any prior experience with things like depth perception, the formerly blind find themselves reaching for objects that are actually well out-of-reach even as they may knock over a glass of water, which is closer than they thought.

Likewise the once-blind misjudge steps and bump into walls all because they have not yet acquired the knack for interpreting visual data. Some even continue to use their white canes for a while so that they can slowly begin to connect how the world has always felt

through the tip of the cane with how it now looks through their eyeballs. As it turns out, this matter of sight is a bit more complex than we might think.”

So, as we are still learning to live as children of the Light, maybe let's be compassionate to ourselves and one another for ways we may stumble about or bump into walls. #

So, this pool's location and purpose for the Jewish people is relevant to why it is the pool Jesus sends this man to. But there is even further significance in this pool's name. John explains in verse 7 that the word Siloam means “sent”. And you may have thought, “Well, that's a random little factoid for St. John to throw in there,” but it's not random. Another way of understanding this is as the “pool of the missionary”, which points to how all of us who are baptized into Christ are set apart to be on mission - missionaries - for Him.

Now, don't hear what I'm not saying: this does not mean we're all called to become foreign missionaries like Milagro, who's just gone to the Philippines for five years. Nor does it even mean we're called to go door to door like the Mormons or some Evangelicals understand mission; I've talked in the past about why that approach is generally missing the mark and not the best practice. But what this does mean is that God *does* intend for all of us to approach our lives with the mission of learning to love others as Christ does - outside of our household and within it - and even point them toward the direction of living in His light when the timing is right. Like Jesus says back in verse 4, “As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming,” when the time for this work will be over. He says, “While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” And the way Jesus is in the world now is through us: the light of His love & truth shining through you and me.

So, by Jesus sending this man to *essentially be baptized* in the “pool of the missionary”: this signifies how Jesus has commissioned all of us who are His disciples to participate in His kingdom work. And sure enough, once the Lord heals this man of His blindness - once he is baptized - *He is given an immediate opportunity to testify* to what Jesus has done for Him, first to his neighbors and then to the Jewish leaders. And testify He does!

But what I want to highlight here is this: that the Lord uses this man as a light for His love & truth, *immediately after* being baptized, while he still lacks basically any theological understanding of what's what. Jesus has not yet taught this man anything at all, He's just changed his life; so that's what this man tells others about. You'll notice that he only progressively begins to understand Jesus' full identity as the passage carries on: in verse 11 he calls Jesus a man; then in verse 17 he's calling Him a prophet. It's not until verses 35-38 that Jesus does teach him something, and he recognizes Jesus' divinity and worships Him. I'll also point out that in verse 31 this guy still has some pretty bad theology; in verse 31 he echoes the view he'd probably been taught by the Pharisees,

saying, “We know that God does not listen to sinners.” As St. Augustine pointed out, if this were true God would listen to any of us! So, remember, this ain’t Jesus speaking in verse 31, it’s just his guy. And yet, in this man’s imperfection, despite not understanding much theology and misunderstanding some things *about God*, the Lord still uses him in a powerful way! And this is relevant for us because I think many feel inadequate to speak about Jesus to others because you may not be confident in your theological understanding, perhaps you’re worried about being stumped with a question or challenge. But that’s the exact situation of this man healed from blindness. When the Pharisees question him, he responds in verse 25 by essentially saying, “Look, I don’t know everything about this guy, but one thing I do know is I was blind but now I see.” “One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!”

This is instructive, frankly, for the most powerful way we can be “missionaries” for the kingdom in our regular lives: and that’s by simply sharing about the impact Jesus has had on our life so far. All this guy is saying to anyone who asks is “I was blind but now I see.” It’s not about knowing all the right answers about God or knowing a ton of scripture. In fact, even for *those who may* have a lot of knowledge about that, sharing the impact Jesus has had on your life is still best, because people can debate theology and scripture till the cows come home. But the ways we are saying our life has changed, no one can really argue with that. Even as a priest who went to seminary and all of that, the best thing I can offer someone is not an answer to every question, but my own spiritual healing that has come through Christ: that I was blind in *so many ways*, and at least in these handful of ways now I can see.

So, I could go on to explore more of what’s going on in this passage. We haven’t even gotten into the Pharisees and their ignorance of their own spiritual blindness. I was gonna include a whole section on that, but instead I want to leave it here: I wonder if we might each take a moment to reflect here: what would you explain your experience of following Christ to be? In what way or ways were you blind and now you see? How would you describe, to someone who wants to know, what difference Jesus makes or has made for you? # # # #

I am confident that as we continue to follow Jesus, He will continue to heal our blindness and provide us with no shortage of reasons to encourage others to trust in God’s goodness, and to abide in Him and worship Him.

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.