

Sermon on John 9:1-41
Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 26, 2017
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

“The Man Who Now Can See – Is There a Problem With That?”

In one of our most beloved animated television specials *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, Charlie is walking home from school on a December afternoon, complaining to his friend Linus about the commercialization of Christmas. Linus finally says to him, “Charlie Brown. You are the only person I know who can take a wonderful holiday like Christmas, and turn it into a problem!”

We have just heard once again the famous parable from John’s gospel, telling the story how Jesus healed a man who had been born blind, and restored his sight with a mixture of mud and spit. This great miracle, which gave this unnamed man a whole new life along with the ability to see, was turned into a problem – a theological crisis by people of faith – from the Pharisees, the religious leaders, to the man’s own parents and even Jesus’ disciples! It turns our own perceptions about sin and grace upside down, where sin comes from and what it may have to do with sickness, injury, misfortune and even death. By the end of the story, we see how our own limited vision can make us “blind” to God’s grace or the humanity of others, and how those whom we think are “blind” may be more able to see God’s truth than you and me. Jesus shakes up our most commonly held perceptions to the core, challenging us with surprising truths from God that we could never have imagined! That’s the gospel – and it’s good news when you and I can finally see it, while most of our lives we walk around blind to it! This is why God sent Jesus in the first place – so that you and I – and the whole world – would have life in his name!

So the story begins, once again with Jesus walking along, when *he saw a man, blind from birth*. It was a common thing, a blind man sitting by the side of the road, begging for bread, or some coins. Not unlike one of those persons who stand by the side of the road at freeway exits or major intersections, with cardboard signs which say ANYTHING HELPS. GOD BLESS. A common sight.

So the disciples asked Jesus, “*Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents?*” Why did they ask this? Well, it was a common belief that there had to be a reason for one’s misfortune, or for such a thing as blindness from one’s birth (when it couldn’t be explained by some unfortunate accident, injury or violence). It must be the result of some sin, a judgment from God (or “the gods”) for doing wrong. It wasn’t only Jewish people who thought this. The Greeks and Romans called it “fate”, or the judgment of the gods on Mount Olympus. Most religions would call

it divine judgment for human misdeeds. Some call it *karma*. I think many of us believe that today – even as we look at some medical condition or disease that may have some cause in genetics, like heart disease or cancer – but don't we sometimes wonder what kind of life choices by parents or some ancestor caused it? Or when we look at poverty, or some other sociological issue, don't we sometimes blame the person, or the parents and family, and look at their behavior? How is this different from what we do today when we look (from our privilege of health and well-being) on people who suffer, and make them live, study, work or play apart from us? Ostracizing others who suffer is a very common human trait. It wasn't only Pharisees, Jews, ancient religious leaders or disciples who thought this way! We all subconsciously may blame the misfortune of people on themselves or their parents or ancestors. We might as well admit it!

But Jesus' answer was swift and direct. Who sinned? *“Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's work might be revealed in him.”* It wasn't a matter of the man's sin, or his parents, that he was born blind. However, God was going to do a great thing, a miracle through him. And so Jesus spat on the ground, made some mud, spread it on the man's eyes, and told him to wash up in the nearby pool of Siloam. He washed his eyes, and now could see!

It was a miracle! No one had ever witnessed such a thing! So how come this miracle suddenly became a BIG PROBLEM? People asked, is this *really* the same man whom we had seen, sitting by the side of the road, blind from birth? Yup. How could this be? They just couldn't wrap their heads around this thing – nor could you or I, if we witnessed it. The man told them all how it had happened – he couldn't explain it but one thing he knew: once he was blind, but now he could see, thanks to Jesus! That's when people brought him to the Pharisees and the religious leaders – for it was their job to be suspicious, to seek the truth, whether he had ever been blind at all, and how this Jesus could have done such a thing. IT WAS JUST TOO UNBELIEVABLE! It challenged their worldview, as it does ours. Such things just do not happen! So they questioned the man's parents – who were afraid of being thrown out of the synagogue, who told them they didn't know anything, they had seen nothing (the well-known “Sgt. Schultz defense from Hogan's Heroes) – and said why don't you ask him? Which they did, and again the man “who could now see” told them that yes, indeed, he could see, and Jesus had done it. Did they also want to become his disciples? (Which could be the first joke recorded in scripture since God told Abraham that he and Sarah would have a son in their old age - and Sarah laughed!) At least God has a sense of humor! And the Man Who Now Could See flashed his ironic wit for our reading enjoyment, but he probably made the religious leaders furious (most religious leaders, bishops and popes aren't known for their sense of humor, unfortunately). I'm betting he and

his parents were cast out of the synagogue, because the man's witness to Jesus' power was too much of a threat to theirs.

A side note to this – John's gospel was written at least 70 years – a whole generation – after all this happened, during a time when Jewish and Christian relations were at their worst. They no longer worshipped together, and took turns persecuting each other, depending on who had the most power. John was telling this story out of his experience of great tension between church and synagogue, and so there are some dynamics here that he may have “projected” onto the story. But we do know that Jesus was controversial – we see that in all of the gospels – and by the time Jesus arrived in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, Jesus's presence, his popularity and message were enough of a threat that some of the most powerful leaders wanted to see him arrested, silenced or dead. And we can look throughout history to see countless examples of God's messengers and faithful people being opposed, excommunicated, arrested, tortured, banished or killed by religious leaders of the Church. One of our key learnings in this story in John is to see ourselves in all the characters, and how the man who was born blind was the only one who could “see” who Jesus really was, as he experienced the power and grace of the one who had healed him, and given him sight. No one else “saw” or understood. Which is the great irony of the story: the ones with the most standing for their “faith” in the religious community were the ones most blind to the presence and action of God in Jesus, the one whom God had sent. Maybe they had the most to lose.

So, I have a problem with the title to the story. We usually hear it called The Story of the Man Born Blind. But his blindness was only the background to story, his past condition, and being thus an outcast was his “context”. Immediately he could see, and he retained his sight throughout the rest of the story. Why can't we call this The Story of the Man Who Now Could See (thanks to Jesus)?! His sight became a stumbling block to the perceptions of others about him, and ultimately, to the faith of the highest leaders. But his sight had transformed him, and given him a new life! It led to his faith in Jesus as the Son of God (Son of Man in the text). So Jesus' gift of healing turned his blindness into sight, and exposed the “spiritual blindness” of the faith leaders. Because what they perceived as spiritual truth (blindness being caused by sin) could not be changed, even by the reality of God's miracle, because it was accomplished by one whom they could not accept: Jesus of Nazareth.

Isn't such stubbornness a common problem today? We have our presuppositions – religious or political – and cannot change them even when reality changes. (Oh, boy, do we see this now in America!) We have our perceptions about other people – this is a white person, this is a black person, this is an Asian, this is an immigrant, this is a racist, this is a liberal, this is a

conservative, on and on – and we cannot change them no matter what happens! We have our perceptions, long ingrained, about gender, gender roles, sexual identity or about race, religions and ethnicity, poverty or wealth, which are almost impossible to “unlearn”. This inability to change can lead us to think absurd things about others, and refuse to change them, lest our whole perception of reality crumble, or our world views fall apart! It’s how we put our faith, or our view of God, into a box. When something happens, or someone says something that challenges this view, we resist. Or we plug our ears, and double down in denial. That’s what the parents, the neighbors, the Pharisees, and the religious leaders did in the story.

This time, we don’t know what the disciples did or said, after they first asked “who sinned”? Maybe they just wisely shut up, and became witnesses! What did they do at the end of the story? Well, perhaps they pondered it’s meaning in their hearts – for who had ever seen one born blind receive their sight again? They would see even greater things than this! Soon they would see Jesus even *raise a man from the dead!* We will read the story of Jesus raising Lazarus next Sunday, as we prepare for Holy Week. And then they would experience the ultimate miracle: when God raised Jesus from death to life! But I’ll wait to say more about that till Easter! I don’t want to spoil the ending!

We know that what the disciples saw and experienced with Jesus changed their lives, just like the man born blind’s life was changed forever when he received his sight. Their questions and doubts were turned into a bold witness of faith in the name of the risen Jesus, with the power of the Holy Spirit. It came do the same for you and me. When we realize that God has the power to change us, and change the things we experience in this life, we can get beyond our own questions and doubts and become bold in witness ourselves! You and I can begin to look beyond physical characteristics, clothing, status, skin color, and paper documents and see each and every person in this world as a child of God! We don’t have to only see others as blind or deaf, undocumented, legal or illegal, citizens or aliens, refugees, natives or immigrants, male, female or transgender, gay or straight, Democrat or Republican, anymore. We can dare to see one another in their wholeness as human beings, children of God, with a rich diversity of characteristics which make us unique and lovable! No longer to be “blind”, but to open our eyes to each other!

God sent Jesus to teach us many lessons – one of them to not be so rigid in our perceptions about God or each other. But the main thing is that God sent Jesus into this world out of love, so that we might believe, and that the whole world will have life in his name. Thanks be to God for this wonderful gift of life! Amen.