

Open My Eyes

Our text for this morning jumps us ahead in John's gospel a bit. After Jesus healed the royal official's son from a distance in chapter 4, he went on to feed thousands on a hillside with a little boy's lunch and taught his disciples what it means for him to be the bread of life. He has had numerous run ins with the religious authorities who are beyond puzzled by this one who heals and preaches unlike anyone they have encountered. Their frustration with him is mounting. At the end of chapter 8, Jesus leaves the Temple following a heated debate with some of the religious leaders before they have the chance to stone him. The stage is now set for chapter 9, a seven-act play that begins with the healing of a man born blind. [John 9: 1-7, *The Message*]¹

Walking down the street, Jesus saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked, "Rabbi, who sinned: this man or his parents, causing him to be born blind?"

³⁻⁵ Jesus said, "You're asking the wrong question. You're looking for someone to blame.

There is no such cause-effect here. Look instead for what God can do. We need to be energetically at work for the One who sent me here, working while the sun shines. When night falls, the workday is over. For as long as I am in the world, there is plenty of light. I am the world's Light."

¹ The passages throughout this sermon are from *The Message* translation.

6-7 He said this and then spit in the dust, made a clay paste with the saliva, rubbed the paste on the blind man's eyes, and said, "Go, wash at the Pool of Siloam" (Siloam means "Sent"). The man went and washed—and saw.

It's an age-old question, one that we still find ways to ask today, even if indirectly. We want to know "why" when tragedy strikes; we want an explanation. One could argue it's just human nature to want an answer. It could also be that it is a question born of fear and a need to feel in control—we want to know so we can figure out how to keep that same fate from befalling us. And Jesus says we're asking the wrong question. He's concerned about healing the one right in front of him, about doing what he has been sent to do, bringing light and life to an embattled world. So he spits on the dirt at his feet and makes mud and smears it on the blind man's eyes, stirring up memories of the dawn of creation when God made new life out of dirt and holy breath. Jesus sends the man to wash off and exits the stage. When the man splashes away the mud and wipes his eyes, he can see.

The scene shifts and the man who washed alone under a single spotlight is now surrounded by his neighbors.

Soon the town was buzzing. His relatives and those who year after year had seen him as a blind man begging were saying, "Why, isn't this the man we knew, who sat here and begged?"

⁹ Others said, "It's him all right!"

But others objected, "It's not the same man at all. It just looks like him."

He said, "It's me, the very one."

¹⁰ They said, "How did your eyes get opened?"

¹¹ "A man named Jesus made a paste and rubbed it on my eyes and told me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' I did what he said. When I washed, I saw."

¹² "So where is he?" "I don't know."

The man can see; and now they see him, sort of. They had him pegged as a beggar. Depending on the day they may have crossed the street or turned their heads to avoid an awkward encounter when they didn't have change on them or not enough to spare. Maybe they haven't really looked at him before, but now he is a sight to behold because he can see. And they need help making sense of what they think they see, so they seek out the people who are supposed to know things. And Jesus remains offstage.

They marched the man to the Pharisees. This day when Jesus made the paste and healed his blindness was the Sabbath. The Pharisees grilled [the man] again on how he had come to see. He said, "He put a clay paste on my eyes, and I washed, and now I see."

¹⁶ Some of the Pharisees said, "Obviously, this man can't be from God. He doesn't keep the Sabbath."

Others countered, "How can a bad man do miraculous, God-revealing things like this?"

There was a split in their ranks.

¹⁷ They came back at the blind man, "You're the expert. He opened your eyes. What do you say about him?" He said, "He is a prophet."

It's strange, isn't it? No one seems to be celebrating that this man can see. There's a miracle standing right in front of them, and the religious authorities can't see past their own debates. They feel a need to pin Jesus down, to make him fit in their boxes of which they have only two it seems: sinner and not sinner. And when they can't answer their own questions, when they can't

squeeze Jesus into one of their categories, they put the healed one on the spot. They ask him what *he* makes of Jesus, and this one who moments ago could see nothing is beginning to see everything more clearly by the second: “He’s a prophet,” the man says. In the span of a few conversations, he has gone from describing Jesus as “that man” to calling him “a prophet,” a man sent by God. The man is struggling to find a category for Jesus, just as the leaders are. But there is a distinct difference. The man seems at ease with wondering and with not being able to pin Jesus down in any fixed way. The leaders are beside themselves with their inability to make sense of Jesus on their terms and with Jesus’ refusal to fit into their boxes. I’m sympathetic. I like things to make sense. I like to be able to place ideas and people in categories, in boxes really. And there have been times when I have wanted people to stay tucked neatly in those boxes so I can believe I know what and who I’m dealing with. I don’t want to be as stubbornly short-sighted as the religious leaders are in the text, but at times I know I am.

The [Jewish leaders] didn’t believe it, didn’t believe the man was blind to begin with. So they called the parents of the man now bright-eyed with sight. They asked them, “Is this your son, the one you say was born blind? So how is it that he now sees?”

²⁰⁻²³ His parents said, “We know he is our son, and we know he was born blind. But we don’t know how he came to see—haven’t a clue about who opened his eyes. Why don’t you ask him? He’s a grown man and can speak for himself.” (His parents were talking like this because they were intimidated by the Jewish leaders, who had already decided that anyone who took a stand that this was the Messiah would be kicked out of the meeting place. That’s why his parents said, “Ask him. He’s a grown man.”)

Jesus is still offstage, and for a moment the healed one is, too. The fear and the anger are reaching a fever pitch. The leaders decide that they cannot and do not want to believe their own eyes, so there must be another explanation for the man being able to see. They do not like what they see, so they try to change the narrative and confront his parents about whether this man was truly born blind. This is where my sympathy runs out. To protect what they want to see and believe, the religious leaders, the ones called to teach God's word and shepherd God's people turn on these two parents who have shouldered their son's struggles and their own guilt and doubts from the time he was first laid in their arms. They've heard the whispers about what *they* did to bring this on their child. They've watched their son begging on the street corner simply to survive. Now they are badgered by the religious leaders who want to twist their family's story to fit their own. And they are frightened.

Scholars believe that the community John's gospel was originally written for had been expelled from the synagogue for professing their faith in Jesus as the Messiah. John's community knows better than most the very thing the parents fear because they have lived it. John's first hearers made a different choice. Decades after Jesus lived, healed, died, and was raised, in the face of every kind of terror from all different directions, John's first hearers could not resist the call to embrace and follow Jesus, sight unseen. John affirms his audience's choice, of course, while also showing sympathy for how difficult it was, and often still is. Then the scene shifts again:

[The leaders] called the man back a second time—the man who had been blind—and told him, "Give credit to God. We know this man is an impostor."

25 He replied, "I know nothing about that one way or the other. But I know one thing for sure: I was blind ... I now see."

26 They said, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?"

27 "I've told you over and over and you haven't listened. Why do you want to hear it again? Are you so eager to become his disciples?"

28-29 With that they jumped all over him. "You might be a disciple of that man, but we're disciples of Moses. We know for sure that God spoke to Moses, but we have no idea where this man even comes from."

30-33 The man replied, "This is amazing! You claim to know nothing about him, but the fact is, he opened my eyes! It's well known that God isn't at the beck and call of sinners, but listens carefully to anyone who lives in reverence and does his will. That someone opened the eyes of a man born blind has never been heard of—ever. If this man didn't come from God, he wouldn't be able to do anything."

34 They said, "You're nothing but dirt! How dare you take that tone with us!" Then they threw him out in the street.

The son suffers the very fate his parents feared. Because his story does not square with what the leaders wish to believe and are fixated on seeing, they expel him from the synagogue. The leaders kick him out of the community of faith not because Jesus healed him, but because the healed one refuses to see things the way the leaders want him to. In the wake of his healing, the man openly begins to question what he thought he knew. The religious leaders—in stark contrast—pound hard on what they insist they know and refuse to see things any differently. And they call the man a disciple of Jesus, thinking that's an insult.

Then Jesus returns to the stage, once again taking notice of this man who has gone unnoticed by almost everyone for years.

Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, and went and found him. He asked him, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?"

³⁶ The man said, "Point him out to me, sir, so that I can believe in him."

³⁷ Jesus said, "You're looking right at him. Don't you recognize my voice?"

³⁸ "Master, I believe," the man said, and worshiped him.

The one thing the religious leaders get right is calling the man Jesus' disciple, because that is who he is. Jesus seeks him out, just as he sought out Nathanael and the other disciples. And the man's healing is complete when Jesus helps him see who has sought him out, found him, and healed him. The man now sees Jesus for who he truly is and worships him, which leads us to the final act.

Jesus then said, "I came into the world to bring everything into the clear light of day, making all the distinctions clear, so that those who have never seen will see, and those who have made a great pretense of seeing will be exposed as blind."

⁴⁰ Some Pharisees overheard him and said, "Does that mean you're calling us blind?"

⁴¹ Jesus said, "If you were really blind, you would be blameless, but since you claim to see everything so well, you're accountable for every fault and failure."

There are posts making the rounds proclaiming that it's never too late to change your mind, to change sides and be on the right side of history, to see the state of the world the right way. There's grace woven in there, of course, a sense that there's time for me to allow my eyes to be opened and to use my voice to speak up and out when God's children are being trampled,

overlooked, abused, or forgotten. There's a danger there, too. When I begin to think I am the only one who sees clearly, I risk losing sight of Jesus. All fall short of the glory of God, which means everyone has blind spots, calcified biases, or fixed notions, including me. Not all blind spots are the same, of course. There are sights we surely cannot unsee, sights that undoubtedly make Jesus weep with sorrow and anger over how some of God's beloved children treat others who are equally God's beloved. AND at the same time, I'm certain that I do not see as clearly as I think I do. I repeatedly need a gracious Savior who rubs mud on my eyes and sends me to wash away all that keeps me from seeing. I need a steady diet of grace, humility, and wonder mixed in with my righteous ideals. The healed one in this story does not claim to know anything other than that he was blind and now he sees. He begins by referring to Jesus as a man, then as a prophet, and finally one worthy of worship and praise and faithful discipleship. In other words, the healed one who does not claim to know it all is the very one who steadily sees more and more clearly over the course of the story. The religious leaders—the authorities who are fixated on what they are certain they know—are the ones who close their eyes and their hearts more and more tightly, refusing to see anything other than what they want to, and they miss seeing Jesus, God's Word Made Flesh for who he truly is.

I am often tempted to cast myself as the healed one with his ever-opening eyes and open heart. And on occasion I am. And yet I am afraid I more often play the role of the religious leaders. I can grow so attached to my boxes and the ways I think God does and should act that I risk missing the very one I need to save me. And I need saving, over and over and over again; I need someone to make me whole, which is what salvation means after all. I need help. I need help seeing who Jesus calls me to be, seeing who Jesus calls me to love, seeing how my

questions are the wrong questions, when my boxes are too small, and where my vision is too narrow. In the end, neither my opinions, nor my ideals, nor my way of seeing the world can save me. Only the Light of the World can do that.

This week we will enter the season of Lent. On Ash Wednesday with confession and ashes we will be called once again to confess the ways we fall short and the ways we cling to our way of seeing things, even as we are reminded of the unfathomable breadth and depth of God's saving love in Jesus Christ. The astounding Good News is that this love seeks us out in our stubbornness and short-sightedness and refuses to leave us there. This love bids us to open our eyes, to do what Jesus says, to see him for who he truly is, and to follow where he leads. By the grace of God, may that love open our eyes and lead us into life, too.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.