

Who Sinned?

As far as I can tell, today's story from John's Gospel is by far the most detailed account of a miracle in all four of the Gospels. This story takes up an entire chapter and has many characters – Jesus, the man who was formerly blind, his parents, the disciples, the religious leaders, and strangers in the crowd. This story is unique in the fact that the vast majority of the content of this chapter is not about the miracle itself but rather about its aftermath.

The miracle is simple enough. Jesus and his disciples come across a man who has been blind from birth. After quickly correcting their mistaken notion that the man was disabled because of sin, Jesus spits in the ground, makes mud, smears it on his eyes, and tells him to wash it off in a nearby pool called Siloam. He does so and then he can see. If this story ended here, it would get lost in the other stories of miraculous healings.

However, what follows once the man gains his sight sets this miracle apart from all others. What follows are several lengthy interrogations in which everyone and their brother try to solve the mystery of how this happened and whether or not this miracle was performed in a worthy, "righteous" manner.

First, the man encounters his neighbors, the ones who for years – decades even – watched him beg by the side of the road. They sit in disbelief. "Could this be the man who we know as the beggar?" "Of course not. It's just someone who *looks* like him!"

Then the man is dragged in front of the religious leaders and they interrogate him. "How could this man have done a miracle? After all, he did what you say he did on the Sabbath. Therefore, that makes him a sinner. And we know that sinners can't perform miracles. So, who's lying here?"

Not getting the answer from him that they wanted, they go and track down the man's parents. They ask *them* how it is that he now sees. They deflect to their son, citing that he is of age to answer questions for himself.

Finally, the religious leaders call the man back before them and lambast him once again with criticism. They continue to call Jesus a sinner.

And all along this rollercoaster ride, as the formerly blind man is in a tug of war between people who just won't bring themselves to accept what has happened, this man is steadfast in his testimony: "I do not know whether he is a sinner," he says. "One thing I do know, that though I was blind, I now see."

The chapter then closes with Jesus finding this man because he has heard how cruelly he has been treated. Jesus reveals himself to the man of who he truly is and the man worships him.

Let's look at our art for today from Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity. She says this about her art: In seven verses, the gospel writer tells us that a man born blind is given sight. But after that, the narrator devotes 33 verses to the details of disagreement that swell after the healing takes place. I used to find this second part of the story tedious and exhausting. In a world with constant conflict, I'm tired of listening to endless bickering.

However, this second half of the story makes me realize that this encounter is hardly about physical healing or literal blindness. It's about how harmful theology can prevent us from seeing people – truly seeing them. It's about how our narrow imagination can harden into accusation and blame. It's about how we can be threatened by new ideas or shifts in someone's identity. It's about how our doctrine can lead to exile. Ultimately, it's a story about our resistance to change. Can this be a cautionary tale for us?

In this image, hands expressing denial and exclusion press in on the man. In the background, I wrote a barrage of questions I imagine emerging from the crowd. *Why did God heal you? What did you do to cause this? Who sinned?* Alongside these questions, I wove in contemporary statements I've heard spoken in situations when we think a tidy rationale will comfort us: *Everything happens for a reason. God only gives you as much as you can handle. Pray harder.*

I wonder what this story would look like had better questions been asked. What if his neighbors had instead asked the blind man, "How do you feel?" What if the man had asked the crowd, "What are you afraid of?" What if the Pharisees had asked one another, "What if it's time to change?"

Surrounded by remnants of narrow vision, the man has new insight. He looks beyond the words, beyond the crowd, beyond the accusations driving him out of town. She finishes by saying, "Can we seek understanding without denigrating or objectifying humans in the process?"

What I want to focus on for today's sermon is not what is in today's passage but on what is noticeably absent from today's passage. What is noticeably absent is any evidence of *celebration*. A man who was blind can now see! If that's not cause for celebration, then I don't know what is! The community has an incredible opportunity here. They have an opportunity to celebrate the fact that this man, who has for his entire life been marginalized, can now participate more fully in the life of the community. They have an opportunity, but they fail.

Instead of throwing the party of the century and celebrating with this man, they let their cynicism take over. Instead of celebrating the fact that this miracle did happen, they beat a dead horse and try to figure out *how* and *why* this miracle happened. Instead of praising the fact that Jesus gave this man his sight, they judge him for doing so on the Sabbath. Instead of rejoicing that this man is no longer forced to beg for his livelihood, they toss him back and forth among one another trying to get to the bottom of what happened.

Simply put, they don't really talk *to* the man, they talk *about* him. How often is it that we treat differently abled people this way?

What is it, then that keeps them from celebrating the miracle that has happened right in their community? Fear. Fear has kept them from experiencing the joy that this miracle should have brought them. Fear of change. Fear of Jesus upsetting the status quo. In giving the man his sight, Jesus is upsetting the balance of things where the people at the top stay on the top and people who are on the bottom stay at the bottom. Jesus is bringing to fruition what he says in the Gospel of Luke where "the first will be last and the last will be first."

Well, today's story is proof that those who are at the bottom welcome that news much more than the folks who have found themselves at the top.

So what is God saying to our church today through the wisdom of this passage? I believe that one of the many things today's passage teaches us is this: When God performs miracles among us, when folks who are hurting are healed, let's celebrate!

Because when God is moving among us and the Holy Spirit is bringing change in Jesus' name, we can respond in one of at least two very different ways. Fear or curiosity. Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. And hate leads to suffering. (And yes, that was a Yoda quote."

But instead of responding to miracles with fear, we can respond with curiosity. And curiosity leads us to very different things. Curiosity leads us to wonder. And wonder leads us to joy. And joy leads us to celebration.

Let's talk about redevelopment for a moment. Are we looking at what we are doing with fear or with curiosity? Yes, it is scary and yes, change is hard. But what if we looked at the new things we are learning about how we can make our mark on United Methodism and the city of Detroit right here on our corner of Woodward and Adams?

I know that there can be fear when we don't know what the end result is. And fear is a normal and healthy human emotion. But it's what we choose to do with it that makes us who we are.

As we continue with our meetings and the information you are receiving, how will you receive it? With fear or curiosity. Because curiosity leads to joy and joy leads to celebration. It's ok to bring a little skepticism to the table. Central you are really good at that. But bring some curiosity with you. Because when this project is done, lives will be changed in our community. People who are experiencing homelessness, will have a roof over their head. Those who use our building for ministry and mission, for the welfare of society, will not have to do our work worrying about the next flood, or the next broken door.

Today's passage compels me to ask myself the following question and I hope you will ask yourself the same question: In this time of change, in this time of wilderness, where is God moving in my life and in the lives of others and how can I celebrate that? In other words, friends, don't let the fear of this moment blind you to the ways that divine healing is happening all around you.

I've seen God's healing power those times during the pandemic when we couldn't meet in person, but everyone stepped up in the church to connect with people through email, letters, phone calls and surprise visits on their lawns.

I've seen God's healing power in how you have embraced four refugee families and adopted them into your lives. From joining in protests, and making food, and babysitting and doing laundry and showing these folks that this is a safe place.

I've seen God's healing power in the fact that we still feed people experiencing homelessness. Another shelter is closed and more people have found their way to NOAH for help and they have found a listening ear.

I've seen God's healing power when people come to worship here simply because of the banners on our building that show what we believe in before they walk in the door.

I've seen God's healing power in us not asking anyone who has come through our doors, "Is it your fault that you're in this predicament. We don't say "She must be incarcerated because..." or "This reason they are being deported must be because..." or He must be experiencing mental health issues because..." "He must be sick because."

As Rev. Bruce Reyes-Chow says in his commentary, It is not a difficult lead for today's application to say, "We know people are poor because..." We know people are incarcerated because..." We know people are sick because..." We know, we know, we know.

The truth is we don't know, but the hope is that we could know more if only we would take the time to ask better questions.

I want to close with a poem from Rev. Sarah Are Speed. She says this poem was inspired by the famous poem, Jesus at the Gay Bar by Jay Hulme. In Jay's poem, Jesus offers words of grace and belonging in a modern day setting. In a similar fashion, I placed Jesus in a hospital setting to reflect the text's (John 9:1-41) focus around healing. In particular, I chose a psychiatric setting to continue dismantling unfair stigmas around mental health. Once again, in this modern day context, Jesus offers words of comfort and belonging. For me, she says, the image of Jesus in therapy with me offers immense comfort and validation. I hope you find the same to be true for you.

The poem is entitled "Jesus in the psych ward

He's in group therapy, plastic chairs in a circle.
Paper cups with weak coffee. Everyone in the room has seeking eyes.

The Pharisees admitted him. They said things like,
He's more than we can handle. They let the rumors fly.

The other patients like him. They say, He listens to me.
He calls them by name.

And when one of them asks,
Is this our fault? Are we here because we sinned?
Jesus does not wait for the facilitator to speak.
He crosses the circle. He kneels down. He grabs their hands
in his and says,

Child of the covenant, God loves you too much to ever wish you pain.
Bodies and minds crumble sometimes, but God's love for you does not.

And after that
There were happy tears and the group was dismissed to lunch,
where they broke bread and no one talked of sin.