

## Humanity's Blindspot

*John 9: 1-41*

As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. <sup>4</sup> We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. The 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?" Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him." He kept saying, "I am he." <sup>10</sup> But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" He 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." They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know."

They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was a Sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. Then 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." Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not observe the Sabbath." Others said, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" And they were divided. So 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."

The 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 and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" His parents answered, "We know that this is our son and that he was born blind, but 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." His 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. Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him."

So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, "Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner." He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" He answered them, "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?" Then they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from." The man answered, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" And they drove him out.

Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him he said, "Do you believe in the

Son of Man?” He answered, “And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.” Jesus said to him, “You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.” He said, “Lord, I believe.” And he worshiped him. Jesus said, “I came into this world for judgment, so that those who do not see may see and those who do see may become blind.” Some of the Pharisees who were with him heard this and said to him, “Surely we are not blind, are we?” Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.”

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Imagine. Disciples and Jesus just left the temple where they were challenged by the religious leaders as they parted on sketchy terms. Actually, it says they picked up stones to throw at Jesus, so maybe more than sketchy. So as Jesus and his disciples were waltzing along there was a man blind from birth. In the story he doesn’t say a word—not yet at least. He keeps to himself in the shadows other than begging for the occasional meal. But like most people with disabilities, he is used to being invisible and ignored. Except, Jesus sees him which causes the disciples see him. But rather than putting a coin in his cup, they ask Jesus a theological question: “Who sinned? The man or his parents?” They want to know who is responsible for this man’s condition?

They get stuck on the sin question, and sometimes we do too, don’t we? We try to solve why people suffer. We wonder why some are born a bit different than others. We look for answers about why there is sickness or bad genes passed down. It was common, back in Jesus’ time, to think that if someone had an ailment or disability outside of the dominant norm, it must have been someone’s fault—someone’s sin which caused it. The thought still lingers: Remember Bea Stuber. How could we forget! Decades before she died in 2020, Bea had a long string of health issues. If it wasn’t one thing it was something else. It seemed after she got one issue under control she would go to the doctor for a follow up appointment and the doctor would discover something else. When listening to her talk about it she would throw her hands up in the air, look up at the sky, and lament, “What did I do?” The disciples want to know, whose responsible for the man being born blind. They are stuck on the sin question.

So notice what Jesus does: he heals the man blind from birth as a response to the disciple’s misunderstandings. The man never asks to be healed, never makes a sound. But Jesus heals him to make an important point: that he was born blind not because of sin, but so the works of God are manifested in him. So Jesus mixes the mud with some spittle—I know it’s gross but anytime there is mud in a story it’s a reference to our original humanity which was created from the soil—and he smears it on the man’s eyes. Tells him to wash in the pool of Siloam. Now the name of the pool means “having been sent.” The Greek word is *apostelmenos*—where we get “apostle” from—and it is all over the gospel of John. Including that God so loved the world that God gave us Jesus who was “sent” not to judge the world, but that we might be made whole through him. It’s a detail which helps us to see that the link we might create between sin and our ailments, or health conditions, or our suffering does not exist at all. Jesus’ heals the man as the answer to the disciple’s question about how sin fits into the picture—it doesn’t! Not at all!

So remember what unfolds after Jesus heals the man? It’s pandemonium. The already unstable community begins to unravel even more. It’s what happens when the scapegoat gets removed, there is confusion and division. There are four groups that appear in the story: the disciples, the neighbors, the parents, and the Pharisees. None of them celebrate the healing of the man born blind, not even his parents! Instead, they are all trying to preserve they system as they distance

themselves from him. It's ironic: all of the actors can't see the man beyond his disability even after he is healed. In the movie *I Am Sam*—it's a story about someone with mental disabilities raising a daughter on his own and the courts trying to take her away from him since he doesn't have the comprehension beyond a fourth grader. There is a scene when his lawyer says, "I just don't know what to call you: retarded, mentally retarded, mentally handicapped, mentally disabled, intellectually handicapped, intellectually disabled, developmentally disabled..." And Sam simply says, "You can call me Sam."

*All four groups* are blind to the healed man's humanity even after he stands tall and says, "I am the man." He's the only other character in the gospel to make an "I am..." statement. All the other I Am statements belong to Jesus and so we begin to see a much clearer picture of what the glory of God at work looks like. Prior to his encounter with Jesus the man said nothing, he had no autonomy. But now he speaks, "I am..." and the man becomes a benefactor of the wholeness Jesus was sent to bring. It turns out what was missing from the man's life wasn't that he had a disability, it was that he didn't have any autonomy. And the glory of God at work is that the wholeness of his humanity is fully restored, even though the system tries to keep him excluded. St. Irenaeus once said, "The glory of God, is a human being fully alive." The problem isn't the disability, the problem is all the ways which our society has a blindspot to people who do. Jesus says, "I came into this world for judgment, so that those who do not see may see and those who do see may become blind." Jesus brings to life the fulness of the man and he brings his humanity and agency into the light. He can see! But the group cannot see what is going on, the glory of God's creative works even when it's right in front of their face.

It's why Jesus was sent. So that we might all display the glory of God and become fully alive. For John's gospel to become fully alive requires the work of the Lord. It requires us to forgive and be forgiven so we can learn our way out of the entanglements of our blindness. It requires our repentance from belonging to false structures which claim we have to be united over/against someone else. And it requires our going and standing with those who are expelled on the margins, just as Jesus does over and over again. Jesus is still shining the light on humanity's blindspot. And he will continue to do so until all of us can stand tall as a beloved child of God and say, "I am."