3.15.26 Sermon on John 9:1-41

This week we have another long passage of Scripture, with another unnamed person whom Jesus encounters. I was thinking about the fact that the last couple of weeks, our characters have remained unnamed, and what the significance of that is. Throughout the entire chapter he's simply called "the man born blind." That actually tells us something important. In the ancient world, a name was tied to one's place in the community – it identified one's family, one's work, one's identity. But this man isn't known for any of those things. Instead, he is defined entirely by his condition.

And this fits in with what we heard happening in this story. The neighbors can't even agree whether he's the same person they've passed by for years. He has been sitting there all this time, and yet people barely know who he is. He's been present, but not really seen.

And so the story begins with Jesus and his disciples, going along the road, when they see that man who has been blind since birth. And the disciples ask what seems, on the surface, like a reasonable theological question. They say, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

The question is revealing, because it shows us the framework they are using to understand suffering. Anytime there is suffering, someone must be to blame. If something has gone wrong in a person's life, there must be a cause, and that cause must be moral: either this man did something wrong, or his parents did something wrong.

This way of thinking has been in existence for a long time. The disciples were not the first to think this way, and they're certainly not the last either. In fact, that way of thinking is still very much alive today. I remember when I was doing my hospital chaplaincy internship, where I spent most of my time in the NICU and PICU units at the University of North Carolina Hospital. There were some really difficult moments in that work, but one of the hardest was when I met with the family of a little three year old girl who had been in a car accident and they were testing for brain death. Her mom was the one who was driving the car when the accident happened, and she was just overcome with guilt and grief, and I can remember her asking me, "What did I do to make God do this to my little girl?" It was an utterly heartbreaking question, but it reflected this same type of thinking. When people suffer, we instinctively look for the reason that explains why. When we face suffering, we wonder what we did to deserve it. If someone is poor, we wonder what poor choices they made to find themselves in that situation. If someone is struggling, we assume they must not have worked hard enough. If someone is sick or disabled or marginalized, we try to locate the "mistake" that explains it. Why? Because if suffering can be explained by someone's fault, then the world still feels orderly and fair.

But Jesus refuses that entire framework. He says, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned.” In other words, the disciples are asking the wrong question. The problem is not the man’s sin, the problem is actually how people see him.

To understand how radical this moment is, we have to understand something about the world this man lived in. In the first century, blindness, like many other disabilities or illnesses, was not just a medical condition. It shaped every part of a person’s life. Someone who was blind would have had very limited ways to earn a living. Most trades required sight. That meant many people who were blind relied on begging just to survive. Socially, people with disabilities were often pushed to the edges of community life. They could become invisible, for all intents and purposes, people others learned to walk on by. The situation could be even more complicated when it came to religion. While the Hebrew Bible does not consistently say that disability is a punishment for sin, many people interpreted suffering that way. Physical conditions were often viewed as evidence that something was wrong, spiritually. In some cases, certain disabilities even limited participation in temple life.

So when the disciples see this man, they are not just seeing someone who cannot see. They are seeing someone who has already been labeled and categorized. They see someone who exists on the margins, who people have learned to ignore.

But Jesus does not walk past him. Instead, Jesus kneels down, and does something I’ve always found to be rather strange: he spits on the ground, makes mud with the saliva, and spreads that mud on the man’s eyes. It’s kind of an odd detail to us, but it would not have been entirely unfamiliar to people in the ancient world. In Greek and Roman medical writings, saliva was sometimes believed to have healing properties, especially for eye conditions. So using spit in a healing act fits within the folk medical practices people knew. Gross, but ok.

But there is also something deeper going on here. Back in Genesis 2, God forms the first human being from the dust of the ground. Dirt, mud, becomes the raw material of creation. When Jesus mixes together mud and saliva to make clay and places it on this man’s eyes, we hear an echo of the creation story. It’s almost as if Jesus is performing a small act of re-creation. He’s not just restoring eyesight, he’s reshaping a life that the world had already written off.

And so Jesus places the mud on the man’s eyes and sends him to wash in the Pool of Siloam. The man goes, washes, and receives his sight. But the story doesn’t end there. In fact, the drama of the story is only just beginning. He comes back from the pool, able to see. The neighbors argue about whether he is even the same person. Some say, “Isn’t this the man who used to sit and beg?” Others say, “No, it only looks like him.” The religious

leaders bring him in for questioning. They interrogate him repeatedly, trying to figure out what happened.

His parents are questioned too, but they are careful about what they say, because the text tells us that people were afraid of being expelled from the synagogue. To be cast out of the synagogue meant losing not only religious belonging but social standing and community life.

And so here this courtroom-like drama unfolds as the religious leaders question the man and his family. As they interrogate, they fixate on one particular detail. Jesus performed this healing on the Sabbath, and making mud, mixing earth and saliva, could be interpreted as work. So instead of celebrating the fact that a man who has lived his entire life in darkness can finally see, the conversation becomes a debate about whether Jesus broke the rules.

In that moment, another type of blindness is revealed. The religious experts are so focused on protecting their system that they cannot recognize the miracle standing in front of them. We might want to point the fingers at the leaders, but in reality, we can fall into the same blindness today. Sometimes we become so focused on protecting our own systems, our policies, or our assumptions about how the world works that we stop seeing the people right in front of us. We can end up protecting our own worldview at the expense of the well-being of another person.

You can see it in the way people talk about homelessness. Someone living outside becomes a problem to be removed rather than a neighbor to be cared for. Conversations revolve around ordinances, enforcement, and rules about where someone is allowed to sit or sleep. And somewhere in the middle of all those debates, the actual human being disappears. Or you can see it in the way people talk about immigrants, or people struggling with addiction, or people whose lives don't fit neatly into the categories we're comfortable with. It becomes easier to argue about policies, or to articulate our assumptions about why they are in the circumstances they are in than to see the person.

That is exactly what is happening here in John 9. The disciples begin by asking who is to blame, while the religious leaders spend the rest of the chapter trying to reassign blame. By the end, they declare the healed man a sinner and throw him out.

The man who can now see is excluded once again, except this time the exclusion is entirely from a religious framework. In the middle of all of this stands the man who used to be blind, who has now become the clearest voice in the entire story.

At first, he only knows the basic facts. "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and told me to wash." But as the questioning continues, his confidence grows. At one

point he says to the religious leaders, “Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes.”

It’s a bit of irony we see here: the religious experts, the people who think they see clearly, are the ones who cannot recognize what God is doing. By the end of the chapter, Jesus says something that sounds like a riddle: “I came into this world so that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind.” In other words, the real issue in this story is not eyesight. It is perception. It is about the ways communities decide who counts and who does not. Who gets blamed? Who gets excluded? Who gets labeled as unworthy?

Blame is a powerful thing because it allows us to keep our distance. If someone else’s suffering is their fault, then the world is just and orderly and we do not have to do anything to change the systems we live in.

Jesus challenges that way of thinking as he touches the eyes of someone everyone had learned to ignore and sends him to the Pool of Siloam. A word about Siloam – it was a part of Jerusalem’s water system, fed by the spring of Gihon through a tunnel carved during the reign of King Hezekiah. Pilgrims often washed in the Pool of Siloam before entering the Temple. It was a place associated with cleansing and restoration. The man receives his sight, but the miracle was also about a deeper transformation and restoration. In this miracle, Jesus also exposes the blindness of a society that had already decided that this man didn’t matter, and that leaves us with a question.

Where are the places in our own world where people are still being blamed for circumstances they did not create? Who are the people our society has already labeled unworthy of care? Who have we learned to walk past?

John 9 invites us to let Jesus change the way we see: to move from a world organized around blame to a world that is instead shaped by empathy and compassion. We are invited to stop asking who deserves suffering, and instead to start asking how we can participate in the work of restoring human dignity, regardless of their circumstances or who they are.

This story reminds us that we are called to be people with generous and seeing hearts. It’s about how we use our attention, our compassion, our resources, and our willingness to see one another. In a world that trains us to look past people, discipleship calls us to practice a kind of generosity in our seeing: to slow down, to pay attention notice, to recognize the dignity and worth in people who are too often reduced to labels or problems. Sometimes the first act of generosity is simply refusing to walk past someone the world has already decided not to see.

The kingdom of God begins the moment people who were invisible are finally seen. Today, may we be a people willing to open up our eyes, our hearts, and our hands to those around us, in the name of Jesus Christ.