

The Blind Man

The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James

Sermon Series:
Following Jesus
Around

John 9:1-7

Some people think they must have done something wrong to deserve suffering.

For 51 years, Bob Edens was blind. He couldn't see a thing. His world was a black tunnel of sounds and smells. He felt his way through five decades of darkness. Then, one day he could see. A skilled surgeon successfully operated on his eyes to restore his sight. For the first time in his life, Bob Edens could see. He found the whole experience overwhelming. "I never dreamed yellow is so yellow! I was amazed by yellow. Red is my favorite color. I just can't believe red. Now I can see the shape of the moon. Watching a jet plane streaking across the sky leaving a vapor trail is one of my favorite sights; and, of course, sunrises and sunsets. At night, I marvel at the stars in the sky and the flashing lights. You could never know how wonderful everything is."

Today's Scripture lesson tells the story of another man healed of his blindness. He must have been Bob Edens's twin.

Our story centers on a man born with congenital blindness. His disciples inquire of Jesus, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?" (John 9:2) Their question assumes this man must have done something wrong to deserve his suffering.

There was in Jesus' day the widespread belief that sin results in

suffering. It was called the law of retribution, which established a causal relationship between people's sin and their resulting suffering, as well as their virtues and corresponding prosperity. This attitude persists in our day. Some people think they must have done something wrong to deserve suffering.

Jesus repudiates in verse 3 the notion that there is a direct relationship between blindness and sin, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned. He was born blind so that God's work might be revealed in him."

Jesus was asked about the cause of the man's blindness, but answers instead in terms of its purpose. This man's affliction will show what God can do. Jesus turns this man's blindness from an occasion to sin to an opportunity "so that God's work may be revealed in him."

Jesus uses his saliva to make a mud pack, anoints the man's eyes and sends him washing in the Pool of Siloam, which, as the text itself explains, is a word meaning "sent." Here "the Sent One" sends the blind man to wash in a pool called sent.

Why does Jesus require him to wash his eyes? Surely Jesus could have healed him right on the spot. In other gospel stories, Jesus heals by the power of touch or merely speaking the word. The role of the recipient in most healing stories is entirely passive. But here in John 9, the blind man actively participates

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in his own healing. Perhaps that's precisely Jesus' point. When the man does as he is told, immediately he receives his sight.

The man's healing creates quite a sensation among the neighbors. Some of them insist he is the same man born blind; others can't believe their eyes. So they ask the experts, religious authorities called Pharisees.

John provides us with a crucial detail in verse 14. The healing of this blind man occurs on the Sabbath. In the first place, Jesus' healing on the Sabbath is permissible only when someone's life is in danger. Second, in making mud, Jesus violates one of the categories of work outlawed on the Sabbath. How petty can you get!

The Pharisees contend Jesus could not be from God since he heals on the Sabbath (9:16). The blind man argues just the opposite— Jesus must be from God because no one can do such work unless he is from God.

The Pharisees call this ex-blind man's parents to testify. "Is this your son who was born blind? How then does he now see?" (8:19). In essence, his parents plead the fifth. His parents are already fearful of the Pharisees, who conspire to put out of the synagogue anyone who confesses Jesus to be the Messiah (8:22).

They bring the man back and exclaim, "Give glory to God" (8:24). It's a phrase used in cross-examination which translates, "tell the truth." The Pharisees try to goad him into making theological determinations about Jesus, but the

blind man sticks to the facts, "One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see" (8:25).

This blind man stands toe-to-toe with the religious authorities. "I've told you already and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?" (8:27).

The Pharisees go ballistic when the blind man makes an inference about becoming Jesus' disciples. "We are disciples of Moses," they contend (8:28). The blind man finds their unbelief in the face of the evidence even more unbelievable than the miracle itself (8:30). "What does this sinner have to teach us?" So they carry out the judgment his parents fear, and drive him out of the temple (8:34).

When Jesus learns of the blind man's plight, he locates the man and discloses his identity. The conversation now shifts from physical blindness toward spiritual blindness. The blind man believes and worships Jesus. He now sees Jesus in a whole new light.

Jesus has come to give sight to those who know they are sightless and to blind those who are smug about the sight they already possess. He has put the Pharisees on notice. He says in verse 39, "I came into this world...so that those who do not see may see and those who see may become blind."

Our story opens with a blind man who receives his sight; it closes with seeing Pharisees who are blind to the truth. Do you catch the irony here? The blind man has his eyes opened, while the seeing ones have their eyes shut. In reality, the

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religious ones are blind while the blind man sees.

Our story is a play on blindness. The Pharisees act as if they are enlightened. But Jesus calls them “blind guides.” They are, to use Jesus’ words, like the blind leading the blind (Matthew 15:14; 23:16-22).

This story dramatizes the truth of Jesus’ words in verse 5, “I am the light of the world.” To receive Jesus is to welcome the light of the world. To reject Jesus is to dismiss the light and become blind. The man in darkness comes to the light. But these so-called enlightened ones remain in darkness.

Who are the blind ones in our story? Those who worship regularly, give money, pray and know their Bible are blind to God. It is possible for people who go to church on a regular basis to be blind to the things of God.

I used to think the song *Amazing Grace* was a bit overdone, when it comes to the words “that saved a wretch like me.” Really now! A wretch!

The hymn was written by John Newton, who spent the early years of his life as a slave captain. Newton would sail near-empty slave ships from England to the coast of Africa. There he would buy slaves and chain them below deck in tiny compartments just large enough for human cargo. Often 20 percent or more would not survive the ordeal at sea.

John Newton found on board a copy of Thomas a Kempis’ classic book, *Imitation of Christ*. When

Newton began to read, it was as if the scales from his eyes fell off and he began to see what he was doing. God opened his eyes to this despicable evil. After a near shipwreck and months of soul searching, Newton gave his life to Christ. Although he once was blind, God helped him to see.

John Newton received the inspiration for his famous hymn *Amazing Grace* from John 9, “Amazing grace how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me; I once was lost but now am found; ‘twas blind but now I see.”

Chris and I were waiting in an airport lobby this week for a delayed flight, when a couple came along and sat next to us. They were carrying six huge Samsonite suitcases. They said something about the fact that several suitcases had exceeded the 50 pound weight limit. They proceeded to open all six suitcases in front of us, in order to redistribute their contents. I couldn’t help but notice that the suitcases were filled with old books. I wondered for a split second if they were smuggling something inside those old books. We were dying of curiosity, so we asked them what they were doing and where they were going. They told us they were headed for an Antiquarian Book Seller’s Convention. Huh? They told us it’s a convention where people buy and sell old rare books. It’s fascinating how people spend their time! “Where do you find these books?” I asked. “Everywhere,” he explain-ed. “They’re probably in your house, even as we speak. You just need to

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- Helen Keller

have eyes to see them.” I thought, what a perfect sermon illustration. The books are there, all we need is eyes to see them. Some things in life are in plain view, but we don’t have eyes to see them.

Paul writes in his letter to the Ephesians about having the eyes of our hearts opened to God (1:18). We sometimes sing in worship, “Open the eyes of my heart, Lord. I want to see you.”

Jesus said, “Blessed are those who do not see [with their eyes], yet believe [with their hearts].

The legendary Helen Keller became deaf and blind at the tender age of 18 months. She went on to lead a full and productive life as a writer and speaker. Near the end of her life, she wrote a magazine article in which she described the things she would like to see if she were granted three days of sight. On the first day, she wanted to see her family and close friends. On the second day, she would like to spend a day in nature. On the third day she would like to see her home city of New York. She concluded the article with these poignant words, “I who am blind can give one hint to those who do not see. Use your eyes as if tomorrow you were stricken blind.”

If Helen could have seen New York, no doubt she would have seen sighted people who were blind to life’s deeper realities. Helen Keller once said, “The only thing worse than being blind is having sight but no vision.”

My favorite quote from Helen Keller is relevant here. “Many people have the wrong idea of

what constitutes true happiness. It is not attained through self-gratification, but fidelity to a worthy purpose.”

Some of us have eyes but do not see. Some of us can see but have no vision.

