

4 Lent A

John 9:1-41

For a fuller understanding of this story, read John 9:1 – 10:21

C'mon! Who Sinned?

Prayer

Matthew L. Skinner, Professor of New Testament at Luther Seminary, writes:

Charismatic and controversial throughout his ministry, the Jesus we meet in the Gospels has a way of rewiring people's assumptions about how things are. What made him a polarizing figure was this: those assumptions (*we hold*) support the norms we rely on to make it through life and to make sense of things as we go.

We're at our worst when we imitate Jesus' pattern in order to elevate Christianity by diminishing or misrepresenting other belief systems. (Just consider how Christian teachers have wielded the Gospel of John's grossly problematic depictions of "the Jews.")

We're at our best when we imitate the pattern to eradicate injustices, extend love, and express compassion. Then we put ourselves on the side of healing -- promoting human flourishing and healthy societies.

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Who sinned, Jesus? This question is at the heart of the Gospel reading for the Fourth Sunday in Lent. Was the man of John 9 born blind because of his own sin or his parents'? Whom can we blame? How can we explain this misfortune? Stupid question. Built on faulty premises.

Jesus doesn't want to talk about why. What's important to know is that "the works of God" are about to become manifest to all. And not only publicly manifest. In the case of the man himself, they will be experienced.

Grace to you and peace, from our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

The Temple Mount. The visible sign of God's presence and favor. The place of identity and pride. From here Jesus walks to escape those who had picked up stones to throw at him. Along the way he and the disciples pass a man, blind since birth. "Who sinned?" the disciples ask, singling out the man. I can almost imagine Jesus stopping, his head and shoulders drooped in frustration. Slowly turning to the disciples to catch their eyes, in a low and deep rumble he utters, "No one sinned! He was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him."

Change, transformation is about to happen, Jesus is on the scene. A sign concerning "the works of God," what we would call a miracle, is performed and the blind man receives his sight, and then the world around him goes dark.

One of the hallmarks of John's Gospel is that when Jesus arrives on the scene and in our lives, everything changes. Limitation falls by the wayside with the one who can turn water into wine. There is no need for sacrifice because the lamb of God who takes away sin is here. Divisions (and their corresponding ethnic definitions) between Samaritans and Jews fade away in the presence of the one who offers living water. And the one who can heal even a man born blind is the One who offers not just life, but life in all its abundance.

John 9 tells us that Jesus rejects all attempts to explain this man's blindness by means of the category of sin. The man's healing serves a different purpose than that of explanation: "he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him." Without exception, neighbors, Pharisees, and parents are unable to see in this event that "God does provide." Not even the man who has been healed understands what has happened to him. Only after Jesus seeks him out and calls him to faith in the Son of Man, does he truly "see." Only after he first believes does he worship the one who is truly God and who has healed far more than just his blindness.

As sign, it points to something beyond itself, to what an encounter with Jesus signifies. What are the signs around us? In this dark time, we are looking for any sign of God's work being revealed. We too often will define another by a label, by

something that we would consider a deficit – physical, spiritual, or moral. Rather than seeing a child of God we often see a problem that needs addressing, needs fixing. It is much easier for us to deal with another through our own deficient identities, those identities that we have spent a lifetime crafting. We fear healthy change, any change that might challenge our understanding of ours or another’s identity. But this is exactly what Jesus does – challenges our understanding of ourselves and of others. The identity that we have so judiciously crafted is changed, made new. Our eyes are opened so that we not only “see” each other but we “see” the work of God in each other through the very presence of Jesus. In our own community this work is being carried out. Just recently you received a new phone tree, a means by which we can check in on each other – not so much because of the Coronavirus, but because of the healing that comes through our engagement and support of each other. This can be but one sign for us of “God’s work” among us.

The irony in John’s story is that the blind man receives his sight, but everyone else in the story loses theirs – not their physical vision, but their capacity to believe and understand what they have witnessed. The community fails (they don’t recognize him, the “blind” man). The religious authorities fail (they want to control the sin narrative). The family fails (their first concern is their safety). The only trustworthy figures in this story are the man born blind and Jesus. The man tells the truth, and even in

the face of threats, the abandonment of his community and family, and expulsion, he sticks to his guns. I was blind, but now I see. Again, and again and again, the man witnesses to the saving grace he has experienced in Jesus Christ.

Jesus is the only one the man can trust, and he is the only one we can trust in this story. Although the Pharisees lay claim to dispensing grace, it is Jesus who transforms. It is Jesus who heals. It is Jesus who stands with the man in his final isolation. He stands with us too.

This is what you have called for: to bear witness to our experience of the works of God in times like these.

Know that in your baptism you have experienced the works of God – you have been healed. Your eyes have been opened. You have been claimed and named. You have been sent with this word of grace.

Amen.