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John 9:1-41

## HERE'S MUD IN YOUR EYE

Two weeks ago, when Nicodemus came to see Jesus, he interpreted Jesus' remarks about being "born again" to mean that he had to somehow crawl back into his mother's womb. Of course, the kind of re-birth Jesus intended had nothing to do with being born again physically.

Then, a week ago, Jesus had an encounter with a woman at a well and they talked about water. When Jesus told her about the living water he could give her, she wondered where she could go to get this special water so she wouldn't have to keep going to the well each day. But of course, Jesus wasn't referring to physical water carried in a bucket.

So what are the chances that when Jesus speaks about blindness in today's reading, that he intends it to be a conversation about the physical condition of blindness? Not likely. The story today about the healing of the man born blind has very little to do with physical blindness. Rather, the story about this man who regains his sight is told as a contrast to those who are born with physical sight but who are unable to see something significant about God that is right in front of them.

A little background information is important for understanding this story. Back when Jesus lived, people interpreted illness or disability as a sign that someone had sinned and was being punished by God. So, not only did a person who was disabled or ill have to deal with their health issues, they were also subjected to societal judgment. In other words, life was doubly tough for them.

This was the issue that was running through the disciples' minds when they saw the blind man. They wanted to know, "who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?" Now

let's think about that for a minute. They are confronted with a person who has been suffering his entire life for a number of reasons and the first thing the disciples are interested in is a theology lesson about who is to blame.

In contrast to their cold detachment, Jesus draws close to the man in compassion and care and uses this as an opportunity to display God's love and power. He spits on the dirt, makes some mud, and spreads the mud on the man's eyes--a rather unconventional healing technique, to be sure, but then again, Jesus was always unconventional. And miraculously the man's sight is restored.

Now, this is where the story should conclude with great rejoicing and praise. But never underestimate our human capacity to take something good and look for some reason to find fault. The man receives his sight but in a rather comedic sequence of events, no one seems happy about this healing and no one can see this event for what it is.

It begins with the neighbors. The man's neighbors can't believe that this is the same man, despite the fact that they have seen him day after day since he was born and that absolutely nothing about this man's appearance has changed. "It's not him," some of them say, "It's just somebody who *looks* like him." All the while the man himself keeps declaring, "I'm the man! It's me!" It reminds me of that Geico commercial of a bunch of kids in a swimming pool, playing that classic swimming pool game of "Marco Polo." The one with the eyes closed calls out "marco" and the others call out "polo." Meanwhile over in a corner of the pool stands the Italian explorer, Marco Polo himself, who looks befuddled and keeps saying, "Io sono Marco Polo," *I'm Marco Polo*. The blind man in our story keeps telling people, "yes, it's me." But no one seems to care or to listen to him. The neighbors are blind to what is right in front of them.

And despite the man's healing, he remains invisible to his neighbors, discounted by them--just as he always has been.

Next we have the Pharisees, the religious leaders of the community. They're unhappy with this healing because, as it turns out, Jesus healed this man on the Sabbath day--a day when no work was supposed to be done. That meant that Jesus broke the rules, as the Pharisees understood these rules. And as it sometimes happens with religions of all stripes, sometimes followers of various religions can become so focused on rules and doctrines and codes of conduct, that they lose sight of what really matters, that they lose sight of what lies at the core of their tradition: compassion toward another human being. And so the Pharisees get sidetracked by the fact that Jesus is a rule breaker and that makes him a sinner, in their eyes. In their eyes--because this story is all about how we see things.

Haven't you seen that happen? We criticize a good deed because the doer didn't do it the "right" way--or at least the way we would find acceptable or appropriate. And we lose sight of what is really important. The Pharisees are so focused on the rules that they are blind to God's power and work and love that is taking place in their midst.

Next, we have the blind man's own parents. These poor folks can't see the wonderful thing God has done for their son because they are blinded by fear. The community leaders stop interrogating the man born blind for a minute and shift their interrogation to the man's parents. "Is this your son? Was he born blind? How is it he now sees?" And the parents are so afraid of the displeasure of these powerful people and what they might do to them, that they cave under the pressure. "This is our son, but we don't know anything. We don't know anything. Ask him. He's a grown man." Any possible joy they might have had for their son's healing is overshadowed, obscured from vision by their fear.

It is only the man whose sight was restored who can see what has happened. God has done something wonderful. He doesn't understand all the theology behind what has just happened. But this much he knows: "I once was blind, but now I see." He knows that God has been at work in his life.

I think this story illustrates our sometimes stubborn resistance to seeing what is right in front of us. Instead of seeing God's activity around us, and in us, and through us, we look for reason *not* to believe. We prefer to live in the darkness rather than open our eyes and hearts to the light of God's presence in our midst.

In the darkness, we can talk about other people's sins, and mistakes, and behaviors without acknowledging our own sin.

In the darkness, we can find reasons to blame people for their suffering: they don't have the right documents to be here; she shouldn't have been there at that hour; he smoked all his life. In the darkness we can blame rather than respond with compassion.

In the darkness, we can let our fear dominate our hearts and minds. We can look only to our own safety and security. We can withhold help, withhold money, withhold giving our selves to others.

In the darkness, we can cling to the rules, to proper procedures and codes of conduct, thinking this will make for a way to manage life's chaos. If everyone would just follow the rules, we think, life would work better. Rules and order will save us.

But they don't. Rules don't save us. And fear doesn't save us. And blame doesn't save us. What saves us is Jesus' love and compassion and grace. Jesus comes to bring sight to the blind--and that is you and me! We are the blind. We have stumbled around in the dark, trying to find a way through this world of struggle and pain. But Jesus comes to give us sight. Jesus

enters our darkness, the muddiness of our lives, and gets his hands dirty with the mud of this world--and touches our eyes and our hearts in order to heal us and to save us.

As followers of Jesus, we have been shown the light. We are called to see what is right in front of us. And what lies right in front of us is God and the opportunity God gives us to reveal God's love. And so every moment, every occasion, every person we meet, is an opportunity to see God at work and to reveal God at work. When we see suffering and need, to respond with compassion rather than with blame. When we have conflicts, to use that as an opportunity to live out God's forgiveness. When we are afraid, to confront our fear and know that God is with us. When faced with a time of difficulty and struggle, to uncover the acts of kindness and goodness extended to us. And then to rejoice and give thanks to God for what we can see right in front of us.

Jesus heals the man born blind "so that God's works might be revealed in him." Jesus comes to you so that God's love and power might be revealed in you, so that others can see the light of God right in front of them.