

Psalm 27:1, 13-14
John 9:1-41

“Formerly Blind”

R.P.C.
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Have you ever stopped to wonder why John, the gospel writer, goes to all the trouble of taking a whole chapter – 41 verses – to relate this particular account? Couldn't he have shared this story of the healing of a blind man in a more abbreviated fashion – a kind of 'Cliff Notes' version? Why bring the disciples into the middle of all of this? Why keep dragging the poor man back and forth in front of his parents and then the Pharisees? Why was it important to listen to all that the neighbors have to say?

What transpires in this account might remind us of how our present day media covers a story from every possible angle, until there is information overkill. We can almost envision some primping, well-intentioned neighbor shaking her head as she talks to the reporter while she glances at the camera: *“You know it really is a shame that they have had to drive him out of the temple at all. I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes.... He had always been such a nice quiet man – kept to himself mostly – of course, that was because of his ... you know ... his disability It's all such a shame....”* So why IS John sharing all of these extra people and all of these side angles to the story with us?

In most of the Gospel accounts, a person finds Jesus, or is found by him; the person is healed and then drops quietly out of the narrative. But not this time! Oh no! This time John relates a rather hurried account of the actual healing, and then proceeds to give a detailed description of the whole world surrounding this man. This blind man – *or should we say, formerly blind man* – tries to begin dealing with his new life, and John opens it all up for his readers to observe.

The healing is in and of itself is quite significant – incredible even. But John is telling us that what happened to the folks around this “formerly blind” man, is just as equally incredible. That is why we need to hear from the nosy neighbors, and the man's parents, and the local religious leaders - because all these 41 verses tell us, in a phrase from Paul Harvey - is “the rest of the story.” So let's unpack this passage and study all these characters for a few moments to see what point John might be making by so carefully including them....

First, there is the whole question as to ‘who really knows what to do’ with a man who – as John puts it – had formerly been blind. Jesus spits in the dirt, makes a mud paste, puts it on the blind man's eyes. The man washes it off as directed by Jesus, and suddenly he can see! That's the miracle of this story in a nutshell.

So this “formerly blind” man is not blind anymore – BUT nobody has any other way to identify him. He used to be identified and defined by his blindness. Nowhere is he given a name – not even by John. He has simply been known in the community as the “blind man” – as “that blind guy who sits on the corner all day, begging.” So now that he has been healed, everything has changed and nobody knows what to do with him anymore.

When the disciples see Jesus giving this man attention, the only thing they can ask is an awkward theological question, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” So even Jesus’ own disciples stamp the poor man with a stigma at the beginning of the story; they too can see nothing else about him, other than his sightlessness.

And the neighbors? Well, all the neighbors seem to know about the man is that he sat and begged. Why was he there? Well, of course it was because he was blind and begging was the only way he could survive. So when the man comes back from washing his eyes in the pool and his vision is now clear, the first thing they say is, “Is this not the man who USED to sit and beg? Some said, “Sure it is!” Others remark, “Na – but it is somebody who only looks like him,”

Remarkably, nobody is really sure. Here they have passed by him nearly every day, but still they could not tell if it was really him. I guess, all they really noticed about him was that he was blind, and now that he was not – well, they just hadn’t really taken the time to notice anything else about the man.... So what does one do with a “formerly blind” man? And what does one do with a piece of good news like that? And how in the world can such a wonderful miracle become such a problem?

Jesus says, *“He was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed through him.”* Is this another one of those cases of God using tragic circumstances to reveal God’s grace? Is this another case of deliverance, like from the slavery in Egypt? Is this another form of a declaration of God’s intention to save? So Jesus spits in the dirt, makes mud, and puts the concoction on the man’s eyes. The man, obeying Jesus’ directive, washes it off – and he can see! That’s remarkable! It’s absolutely remarkable! It’s a miracle of God’s grace!

One would think that the whole neighborhood would turn out to celebrate! Hey, let’s kill the fatted calf and have a barbecue! Let’s pop the cork on that special wine we have been saving for a special occasion. “Did you hear what happened? The blind guy at the corner isn’t blind anymore! He can see now! Come on... join the party! You gotta come see this!”

One would think that there would be a celebration, a street party, or at the very least a spontaneous outburst around this man. One would think there would be some tears of joy shed – a few hugs and some high-fives. One would think children would bring the man things like grasshoppers, caterpillars and flowers so the man could see them for the first time. Can't we just imagine the smile on his mother's face, looking at her son and realizing that he was seeing her for the first time? Or imagine his father taking him around the shoulders and pointing out all the features of their home and village for the first time? Or, the man's own delight at being able to see the faces of the people whose voices he has heard all these years? But there is no celebration, no party in this story; a wondrous miracle – a gift from God - has proven to be ... problematic.

Here's a grown man who can see for the first time in his life – a man who has quite literally been given a whole new life by Jesus. It's reminiscent of creation actually – of God stooping down into the dust, add a little water perhaps, and creating a human being with the breath of life – the 'dirt people' as Erin called them when she was five - then calling it good. And now here is Jesus, spitting into the dust to make mud, and placing it on the man's eyes. There is sight and new life – here's RE-creation.

But there is no rejoicing... Everyone – even the formerly blind man – was used to and was dependent upon life being the way it was. We almost get the feeling that everybody wishes Jesus hadn't messed with things, but had left them the way they were.

I mean, what does the formerly blind man DO now? He certainly can't beg anymore. His former life, as he knew it is over, and he will have to change. Now he will have to learn a skill or develop a trade to earn a living – no more alms given and received in pity. He will have to learn to look at people – to stare them in the eye. No longer will he be able to simply listen to their words, but now he will have to learn body language to determine what they are really saying and really mean.

What are the neighbors to do when they can no longer treat him as a blind beggar? They will have to treat him in a whole new way; they will have to re-label him with a new identity and treat him as ... a peer.

When the old reality is taken over by a new life, it can disorient everybody. It destabilizes a predictable world, and some would always like to return the way things were. It's like when God brought his people out of their slavery in Egypt. Were they happy? Did they rejoice and celebrate?

“Moses” they soon complained, “why did you bring us out of Egypt to kill us and our children and our livestock?” “If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread.” Imagine, they were ready to turn around and run right back into a life of slavery. Liberation – a whole new way of life was too much for them. They wanted to get things back to normal – What? slavery ... normal? It looks like that is the same case in John’s account.

So where do you go when you want to get things back under control – back to normal? Why you go to the Pharisees, of course – you go back to law and order. Yea, these religious and civil authorities will fix things. For you see, in addition to everything else about this healing, Jesus performed it on the Sabbath – a clear breach of the law. People shouldn’t be doing things like that on the Sabbath and causing a stir on the Lord’s Day. Why it’s just not the way it’s done.... It’s not respectable!

So they bring this formerly blind man to the Pharisees. Do the Pharisees rejoice for this man and the miracle of his healing as a sign of the grace of God? Do they throw a party? Of course not! All they can SEE is that things are not as they should be. They question the man sharply and doubt his integrity. They suspect that Jesus might have been involved in something sinister, never recognizing the remarkable, incredible results.

So the Pharisees bring in the formerly blind man parents to check out his family medical history. Do his parents rejoice at the healing of their son? Maybe secretly, but not openly, because they are afraid of the authorities. “We don’t know what happened – who did this and all. Ask him. Our son is old enough to speak for himself. He may have been blind, but he’s not deaf and dumb, you know.

The Pharisees bring the formerly blind man back in to try to discredit the whole affair. “You know, of course, that the man who spat in the dirt and healed you is a sinner,” they say. “I wouldn’t know anything about that,” the healed man says looking at them. “I just know that ‘once I was blind, but now I see.’”

The Pharisees are holding back and holding on to their world and their laws as hard as they can. They push this formerly blind man to say something – to say anything that will put their world back on its axis. “You are HIS disciple, but we are disciples of Moses,” they say. “We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.” “Here’s the astonishing thing!” counters the formerly blind man, “You do not know where he comes from and yet he opened my eyes. 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!”

And there we have it ... The elephant in the room has been identified. The ultimate truth has been revealed. Could it actually be that God is behind all this healing? Is it God who wants liberation – new life – RE-creation for human beings? Is it God who disrupts the Sabbath, the law and the status quo of this world – who keeps things from getting back to normal?

The Pharisees want nothing to do with that suggestion. They revert back to the safety of their old, familiar world. “You (you formerly blind man) ... you were born in sin, and you are trying to teach us? And they drive him out of the temple.

Jesus finds the formerly blind, now excommunicated man and asks him, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” The man with his eyes and heart now wide open asks, “And who is he sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.” Jesus replies, “You have SEEN him, and the one speaking to you is he.” The once-blind man confesses, “Lord, I believe.” Jesus concludes by saying, “I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.”

John tells us about the healing of the blind man quickly. The remaining 33 verses tell the story – the rest of the story. They tell us about those who are truly blind: the Pharisees, the neighbors, perhaps the parents – and yes, even Jesus’ own disciples.

You see, with the light of Christ Jesus in the world, there is no safe middle ground. There is the old way – and there is liberation, new life – RE-creation. There is darkness and there is light; there is blindness and there is sight. And so we all have to come to terms with the question: “Do we risk it all for this one who spits in the dirt to heal us and re-create us, and would show us the light – or do we try to safely save the life we have? The incredible, ridiculous encounters of the man who was formerly blind reminds us that the tendency is that too often we have chosen the safe life we have. And this is the judgment upon us: “... that light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light.”

Yet, if by chance the words of the Gospel have reached out hearts today, and given us new vision – If by chance, we ‘once were lost, but now are found – were blind but now we see...’ If we can now be counted among those who were formerly blind.... then we had better get busy; for there is a PARTY TO THROW – one that’s been long overdue.....

Amen.

