

Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Reno, NV

Pastor Scott Trevithick

Date: March 19, 2023, Yr. A, 4th Sunday in Lent

Text: John 9:1-41

Title: Who Sinned?

Focus: From the questions they ask, the disciples and the Pharisees and others seem more concerned about who is to blame or if someone broke the rules or how can power be exerted rather than the good news of healing and connection to community. How can we follow Jesus as one who brought healing, invited people into relationship, and restored people to community?

Gospel Reading: John 9:1-41

¹As [Jesus] walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. ²His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" ³Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. ⁴We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. ⁵As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." ⁶When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, ⁷saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see.

⁸The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?" ⁹Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him." He kept saying, "I am the man." ¹⁰But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" ¹¹He answered, "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' Then I went and washed and received my sight." ¹²They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know."

¹³They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. ¹⁴Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. ¹⁵Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, "He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see." ¹⁶Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath." But others said, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" And they were divided. ¹⁷So they said again to the blind man, "What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened." He said, "He is a prophet." ¹⁸The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight ¹⁹and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" ²⁰His parents answered, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; ²¹but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself." ²²His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. ²³Therefore his parents said, "He is of

age; ask him.” ²⁴So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, “Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner.” ²⁵He answered, “I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.” ²⁶They said to him, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?” ²⁷He answered them, “I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?” ²⁸Then they reviled him, saying, “You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. ²⁹We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.” ³⁰The man answered, “Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. ³¹We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. ³²Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. ³³If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.” ³⁴They answered him, “You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?” And they drove him out.

³⁵Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” ³⁶He answered, “And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.” ³⁷Jesus said to him, “You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.” ³⁸He said, “Lord, I believe.” And he worshiped him.

³⁹Jesus said, “I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.” ⁴⁰Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, “Surely we are not blind, are we?” ⁴¹Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.

Questions. . .

This story is full of questions. The first one, “Who sinned?” or “Who sinned, that this man was born blind?” (v. 2) was asked by the disciples, but the questions keep on coming.

- “Is this not the man who used to sit and beg? (v. 8)
- He kept saying, “I am the man.”
 - ¹⁰But they kept asking him, “Then how were your eyes opened?”
 - When they told him it was Jesus, they continued to badger him:
 - “Where is he?”
 - He said, “I do not know.”
- Since it was a sabbath day when Jesus opened the man’s eyes, the Pharisees also began fuss about it and asked him how he had received his sight.
- He explained, “He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see.”
- They were divided about Jesus with some saying, “This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath.”
- But others said, “How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?”

- They badgered the man: “What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened” (v. 17).
- They badgered the man’s parents: They did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight:
- “Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?” (v. 19).
- The parents directed them back to their son (v. 23).
- ²⁶[The Pharisees] said to him, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?”
 - ²⁷He answered them, “I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?”
 - (He’s a bit sassy with them, don’t you think?!)

There are lots of questions in this story.

How Do You Hear These Questions?

When we started this Lenten series under the thematic heading: “**Seeking: honest questions for deeper faith**” we talked about the intent of asking questions in this way—as a way of seeking deeper faith. Here is how some of the *Sanctified Art* creators described it:

- “We encourage you to stay curious, open, and nimble. We hope you will soften your assumptions and expand your perspectives.”
- “We pray that these questions will create a safe place to explore—to be drawn more deeply in the fullness of life, into the heart of God.”

This story is full of questions, but I don’t hear them as “curious, open, or nimble” at all. I don’t hear them as an effort to “soften one’s assumptions or expand one’s perspectives.” I hear them as skepticism and irritation. I hear them as coming from a place of entrenched position. I don’t hear them as a “softening of assumptions,” but as a declaration of one’s own position and a demand that the responder declare a position as well so that our opposition can be made clear, and we can exert some kind of reprisal on you.

The disciples start the conversation with a question that, as I have described, doesn’t really seem like an effort to deepen faith or understand, but states its own position and forces Jesus to take sides as well.

“**Who sinned, that this man was born blind?**” (v. 2) Because, apparently, there is no other explanation. It’s framed as an either-or scenario. So, someone’s to blame. Someone’s at fault. This is bad and this man must have deserved this.

Jesus responds, refuting their assumption, telling them that it wasn't this man or his parents. He spat on the ground and mixed some mud with his finger and spread it on the man's eyes. The man washed in the pool as Jesus instructed him and he could see (v. 7).

These questions continued, even after the man could see.

Gospel writer John uses the term *signs* to describe actions of Jesus that give insight about who Jesus is as God's son. John uses the word *signs* rather than *miracles*. It's ironic that this is one of the *signs* in John's gospel and yet rather than see the sign or consider how it points to Jesus and what it says about him, it seems from the questions that people are asking that they've nearly ignored the sign.

- People are fixated on who to blame or what happened.
- Or they want to pin down Jesus:
 - "Who did this—was it Jesus?" and
 - "Did he do it on the Sabbath so that we can bust him."
- The man's parents are scared because they see the power play at work, and they don't want to get caught up in it (v. 22).
- The man himself answers plainly—"He put mud on my eyes and then I washed and could see" (v. 7). "I was blind and now I see" (v. 25).

The questions people ask show where their attention is or what is most important to them. They're asking questions to confirm their position or to trap Jesus.

It's ironic that *signs* are in John's gospel to demonstrate something about Jesus, but it's almost like people here don't even want to pay attention to the sign. They're fussing about blame or entrapment or avoiding trouble. Everyone but the man himself seems to hardly notice the good news that he can see and that Jesus has invited him in to a new relationship.

What attitudes and assumptions do we hold?

The either-or framework of the disciples asking, "Who sinned?" likely sounds archaic to us, but I would guess that we, too, have ways in which we blame people for their circumstance. We likely hold assumptions about others and are blind to those assumptions until they are pointed out to us.

When something bad happens to us, we are prone to view it as an unfortunate accident or an against-all-odds quirk. "It's not related to my character; it just happened. It's an unfortunate thing." When something bad happens to others, the thought creeps in that they may have made a bad choice that precipitated it.

Diane, who is a new member being welcomed today, told me about her daughter-in-law Jenna, who frequently uses a wheelchair. Diane told me about a recent

interaction Jenna had with someone. This person approached her, perhaps trying to compliment her or maybe even express empathy, but Jenna sure didn't hear it that way.

- “You’re so pretty! You’re too pretty to be in a wheelchair.”

How would one respond to that? What response could there be? I can imagine one that would expose the odd assumption behind what they said:

- “I’m too pretty? Would it be better if I were outwardly ugly in your eyes?”

This person closed the conversation with “We’ll pray for you. . .” which I suppose was meant to be compassionate, but what it suggested to Jenna was “because there’s something wrong with you.”

Jenna replied, “I’ll pray for you, too.”

Jesus and the Man

I want to pay attention to the interaction between Jesus and the man who was born blind. At the close of the story, the Pharisees were angry at the man, and they drove him out. Jesus went and found him.

- ³⁵Jesus said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?”
- ³⁶He answered, “And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.”
- ³⁷Jesus said to him, “You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.”
- ³⁸He said, “Lord, I believe.” And he worshiped him.

Believe, especially in the Gospel of John, is not about intellectual assent, as in agreeing with a particular proposition or using a Big Church Word to describe Jesus: “Here’s what I believe about Jesus.”

Believe, especially in John, is about having a relationship of trust with Jesus.

Believe is how the woman at the well responded in John chapter 4 when she experienced the *Radical Welcome* that Dale talked about last week and she excitedly went to tell others in her town about Jesus.

In the story that follows this one in chapter 10 of John, Jesus explains about what he’s offering. It’s a commentary on this conversation about what it means to *believe*.

I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. ¹¹“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. . .
¹⁴I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me. . .
 And I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice (Excerpts from John 10)

This man was blind from birth and experienced separation and isolation. He was driven out of his community (vv. 34-35).

Jesus' question, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" (v. 35) was an invitation to experience connection, community, and wholeness as a part of abundant life.

Jesus Saw the Man

There are lots of questions in this story. The questions seem to show what was most important to people or where their attention was.

There's a detail in this story we haven't talked about yet. It's about Jesus and his attention; it's about what was most important to him.

The very first line of the story: Do you remember it? Did you notice?

- ¹As [Jesus] walked along, he **saw** a man blind from birth.
 - Jesus noticed and saw and interacted with him and offered abundant life.

Jesus was always reaching out to those who were on the outside. . . Like Nicodemus, who came to Jesus at night because he had some anxiety and fear about what others would say if they knew he went to meet Jesus . . . Like the woman at the well, who was outcast by her community. . . Jesus was always reaching out to the ones on the margins, the ones who were isolated and left out. He wasn't distracted by the fussiness of others but reached out to offer wholeness and relationship and community.

Wholeness and Healing in Jesus' Name

On Tuesday of this week, I drove home after a day at the church office. When I got home, I discovered I had left my phone at the church. I went back to get it. When I arrived, the Tuesday early evening 12-Step group had just concluded. Folks were lingering over conversations with friends in the church parking lot. Seeing me coming toward the church, one guy greeted me warmly, "I've been coming here 12 years. It's been a blessing. Thank you for letting us use the church."

"We're glad to have you here," I honestly told him.

AA and the other 12-Step groups which meet at the church are likely invisible to most Good Shepherd folks, but this exchange was another reminder to me of the promise in our Welcome Statement

- "This is a place where you are welcome to celebrate and grieve, to rejoice and recover. No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here. This is a place where lives are made new. **Come and see!**

I want my attention or our attention to be on the good news in this story and the community and abundant life Jesus offers. Thanks be to God for a love like that.