

Learning to See

John 9:1-13

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As Jesus walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world."

When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. The 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?"

Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him." He kept saying, "I am the man." But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" He 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." They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know." They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind.

John 9:1-13

What do you see?

There is physical seeing – reading, computer screens, distance, TV

When our vision changes it affects us. I have progressive lenses. Trifocal contacts.

We are people who like to see things before we believe it.

And we like to know why something happens. Cause and effect. That is good science.

However, sometimes we are blinded by our narrow vision or bias or lens. And we might miss what is in front of us.

For Jesus in John's gospel, everything in the world is a sign that points to him, helping us see and hear him more clearly. In John's gospel, there aren't *miracles* as we have in the other gospels. There are *signs*.

And the signs aren't big deals on their own. Jesus spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes? Not much of a miracle. Spit. Mud. No, this story isn't about the ingredients of the sign. It is about how the sign points to Jesus. Signs are events

and actions that make our vision clearer and make our hearing sharper. Signs change people – their bodies, their minds, their souls, their hearts. (1)

Unless they don't.

For some people in this story, the signs don't improve their vision. This sign, of the man born blind having his sight restored, doesn't in any way, fit with the world they know and can explain. And as such, even though they are asking questions, they seem to be standing there like this: with their hands over their ears and their eyes closed, singing "*la la la la la. Not listening!*"

What do we see when we look? That's the question for John.

How do we make sure we don't only see what we're already looking for?

This story suggests clear vision doesn't come from being fixated on the HOW or WHY questions that try to quantify, explain away, or control the mystery of faith.

Some people are born blind. Others are born with perfect sight. In the world we live in, some people, not because of any bad decision or choice of theirs, have more than their share of difficulty. Jesus doesn't blame the blind man for his misfortune. Jesus also doesn't praise people for misfortune, as if they are somehow more worthy of God's love because of it. Jesus doesn't explain it all.

And the formerly blind man doesn't either. He's not interested in speculation. They ask him, and they ask him again, about how he was healed.

How did it happen?

Who did this?

What do you say about him?

For the formerly blind man, it is the act of testifying about his experience that brings him to sight. Yes, Jesus restored his vision, but lots of people have functioning eyes. It was his repeated testimony that seems to move him to seeing who Jesus truly is. "Lord I believe", he says to Jesus at the end of the story.

But the crowd doesn't even recognize the man when he first comes back with his sight. He has to keep telling them, "I am that guy".

So then they ask him, '*fine, if you're the blind man, how can you see now?*'

"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."

He testifies to his experience. He doesn't say that everyone needs to have the same experience he did. He doesn't claim that his experience is more valid than someone else's. He just says what he knows.

They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know."

I wish the crowds had asked him,
*"What did the mud feel like when he put it on your face?
What is it like to see? Is it what you thought it would be?"*

What if instead of trying to make sense of everyone else's experience, we could just enjoy it with them?

But instead they take him to the Pharisees, who sadly get blinded by the technicality of the sign. Jesus made mud on the Sabbath. The mud business doesn't seem like a big deal to us, but Pharaoh had the Israelites make mud into bricks, remember. Because of that long memory, there were rules about working and using mud and making bricks on the Sabbath. But no matter how useful and beneficial those rules had been at the beginning, once the religious leaders have quantified their faith experience into only rules and restrictions, they missed the opportunity to see God.

Through the interrogation with the Pharisees, the formerly blind man doesn't get sidetracked. He keeps telling them what his experience was. And, when pressed, he makes a claim about Jesus. "He is a prophet." His awareness of Jesus seems to be getting clearer for him as it remains muddled for the religious officials. They even all in his parents. They throw up their hands. Not the parents' finest hour. *"Why are you putting us in this uncomfortable situation? We didn't do anything. Just ask him!"* Gee, thanks mom and dad.

But sometimes our families are the last people who can understand our experience of transformation, of God's healing love and grace, of seeing with new eyes.

He continues to speak of his experience and how the sign of Jesus helped him to see. Jesus saw him, spoke to him, did something unusual with the mud, told the man to take the next steps. The man's testimony, his reflection to tell his story becomes stronger.

Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where Jesus comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. ... If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.

And then he's driven out of his community. They decide their preconceptions about God are more important than the man's experience of being healed by Jesus. The story ends with when Jesus comes and finds him and gives him the opportunity affirm his faith.

That's all we can do.

We can't explain away the troubles of the world.

We can't explain away the mysteries of the faith. We can't open other people's eyes

But we can be open to those moments that open our eyes to deeper truths and deeper love and deeper compassion. We can be willing to listen to each other's stories, testimonies for healing and hope.

I have been reading and listening to the stories of Sept. 11. So many stories of what people saw and experienced that day. NYT ran a few. Here are two that struck me about what they saw and how it changed them (www.nytimes.com/2021/09/10/opinion/letters/9-11-reflections)

Mark from Brooklyn - I witnessed the searing destructiveness of naked hate that day, and vowed to work to eliminate it from my own heart, and to teach my children to understand the dynamics of hate and how to temper it within them.

Candice from NYC - The 9/11 attacks taught me, in the words of Fred Rogers, to "look for the helpers." As planes hit the twin towers, my husband and I were living in the shadow of the World Trade Center and he had just arrived at work in a building adjacent to it. As we found each other and escaped together up the West Side Highway, me seven months pregnant with our first child, I was struck by the kindness within the chaos. People helped me get on a boat and they drove us to Hoeboken to safety. The acts of kindness continued all day. With eternal gratitude, I will forever continue to pay them forward.

Today look over the opportunities for worship, centering prayer, adult ed, service opportunities, supporting ministries and mission with time and money. See with new eyes.

Through prayer, through worship, through silence, through working together, God strengthens our desire to see what is true and real and there, but hidden to us by our own biases. Close with a prayer written by Brian McClaren featured in a recent podcast "Learning How to See."

Source of wonder, help us see with wonder.

Depth of mystery, help us find delight and truth

so profound that they surpass all knowing.

Fountain of compassion, help us see with compassion.

Bringer of justice, help us see with justice,

Revealer of truth, help us see what is real.

Holy wisdom, whose presence fills our ever expanding universe,
help our horizons ever to expand.

Light of glory, help us to see with humility and awe. Amen. (2)

1) Rev. Marci Glass, "Clear Vision," 2.10.18 glassoverflowing blog

<https://marciglass.com/2018/02/10/clear-vision/>

2) Rev. Brian McClaren, "Learning How To See Podcast – What Do You Want?" 8.6.21

<https://cac.org/podcast/learning-how-to-see/>