

**The Blind Man Sees – Seeing Ones are Blind
Jesus Heals the Man Born Blind (John 9:1-41)**

Everyone has compassion for a physically blind person and admiration for the courage and resourcefulness a blind one shows in taking hold of life. Other types of blindness will cause a negative reaction in us. Moral and spiritual blindness will prevent religious conversion and faith growth and often cause harm to others. Both kinds of blindness appear in John's ninth chapter.

This story as narrated by John lends itself to a dramatic presentation, which we will use to begin this chapter. The reflection will follow this imaginative reconstruction of the sequence of events.

The Miracle

John: See that blind beggar. I hear he has been on this corner for years.

Philip: I spent some time with him yesterday. He's a crusty character. He pushed his way to this spot where he could be near the most pilgrims to the temple. Told me that he has been blind from birth.

John: A pity. I wonder what sin caused his problem.

Philip: Jesus, do you think this man's blindness was due to his own sin?

Jesus: If that were so, Philip, he would have to have sinned when he was in his mother's womb. Can you believe that?

Philip: I suppose not. Well then, was it his parents' sin?

Jesus: I'm not sure we want to stand here and discuss the mystery of evil and its effects while this poor man suffers. Through him God's glory-presence will be experienced.

(Jesus bends down and begins to mix his saliva with the clay.)

John: Master, what are you doing?

Jesus: Watch....Sir, let me put this paste on your eyes. I want to heal you.

Blind Man: All right. Others have tried. But I'm always hopeful.

Jesus: Go to the Pool of Siloam and wash away the mud from your eyes. You will see for the first time in your life. (He went off and washed and came back able to see.)

**The Investigations –
Neighbors and Friends Question the Beggar**

A Neighbor: Isn't he the one who used to be a beggar?

A Shop Owner: No. Just looks like him, that's all.

Blind Man: I'm the one. I've been healed.

Neighbor: Amazing! How did it happen?

Blind Man: You have heard of Jesus. He upset a lot of people at the Tabernacles festival. Well he made some mud, smeared it on my eyes. Told me to go to Siloam and wash the mud off. At that moment I could see. I could see!

Shop Owner: Where's Jesus now?

Blind Man: I have no idea.

(Pharisees examine him.)

Pharisee: How is that you can see?

Blind Man: Jesus put mud on my eyes. I washed them. Now I see.

Pharisee: He did this on the Sabbath?

Blind Man: Yes.

Pharisee: He broke the Sabbath law on work.

Scribe: Such a man cannot be from God.

Pharisee: Still, how can he be a sinner and yet perform such miracles? He healed you, sir. What do you think of him?

Blind Man: That's easy. He's a Prophet.

The Jews Opposed to Jesus Interrogate the Beggar's Parents

A Jew: Is this your son?

Mother: Yes.

A Jew: Was he born blind?

Father: Yes.

A Jew: We don't believe you. It's impossible that this happened.

Mother: I'm his mother. I should know. It broke my heart.

Father: Look, this is our son. Of course we know he was born blind. We have no idea how he was cured. Ask him. He is old enough to speak for himself. We don't want any trouble about our membership in the synagogue.

Pharisees' Second Interrogation of the Blind Man

Pharisee: Honor God with truth. Declare that Jesus is a sinner.

Blind Man: How would I know that he is a sinner? Listen carefully to me. I'll say it slow. I was blind. Now I see.

Scribe: How could he have done this? What did he do?

Blind Man: I may have been blind. You seem to be deaf and your condition is getting worse. I already told you how he did it. You don't pay attention....Wait! I know why you want to hear the story again. You want to be his disciples.

A Jew: Never! You are his disciple. We follow Moses not this charlatan. We know that God spoke to Moses. We have no confidence in this faker.

Blind Man: Jesus is a kind man.

Pharisee: He's a sinner.

Blind Man: You people are crazy. Everyone in the street knows that God does not listen to sinners. God pays attention to good people who obey his will. No one ever heard of someone curing a man born blind. I tell each and everyone of you this man is from God. That's why he could cure me.

Scribe: You were born steeped in sin! You have a nerve lecturing us!

Pharisee: Throw him out of here!

Jesus Gives Him Spiritual Sight

Jesus: Did they give you a hard time?

Blind Man: Don't worry. I knew how to handle them. I've been a fighter since I was a child.

Jesus: Do you believe in the Son of Man?

Blind Man: Tell me who he is. I want to believe in him.

Jesus: You are looking at him with your new found sight. I invite you to look with faith.

Blind Man: I do believe, Lord. (And he bowed to worship Jesus.)

The blind beggar of this story comes across as a tough and seasoned man. Blind from birth he has made the best of his life. He is a man of character. His disability has made him street smart. No one is going to push him around, as became evident in his short exchange with the Pharisees.

He must have been a well-known figure near the temple area, having claimed his begging spot with a combination of aggressiveness and seniority among the local mendicants. The encounter with Jesus and the apostles may have taken place during Tabernacles. At that feast, Jesus had said he was the world's light. In a very complete way he would prove this by healing the total person of a blind man, his physical eyes and the eyes of his soul.

The apostles noted that the man had been blind from birth. Was that due to his own sins or those of his parents? Popular religion of the time held that illness and disease were punishments for sins. If you were born with an affliction, it was assumed that the sins of your parents were responsible. "I, the Lord, your God, am a jealous God. Inflicting punishment for their fathers' wickedness on the children of those who hate me" (Exodus 20:5). However, there was an eccentric, minority opinion that even a baby in the womb was capable of sin, in which case the unborn child was the cause of the misfortune. Following this view, the blind man could have sinned prior to birth and so incurred his loss of sight.

Jesus did not try to explain the link between sin and suffering. He said that this man's problem was an occasion for illustrating what God can do. In the synoptic gospels, miracles were signs of God's compassion for human suffering. In John's gospel, they reveal God's glory-presence to human awareness.

These are complementary, not contradictory purposes. One may think of the God of compassion as still very far away from everyday life. John's teaching makes it clear that the divine miracle worker is as near as the warm touch of a healing hand. Miracles in the synoptics looked at the *joyful results in the healed*. Miracles in John observed the *people's joyful experience of the healer*. One looked at the outcome. The other looked at the cause.

Jesus then reminded them of what he had just said at Tabernacles. He was the light of the world. He proceeded to spit on the ground and make some mud from the clay. He smeared the mud paste on the blind man's eyes and told him to go and wash them in the Pool of Siloam. The man did so and received the gift of sight.

Three times in the gospels Jesus used saliva to effect a cure, here in John, again in the case of the deaf stutterer in Mark 7:33, and of another blind man in Mark 8:22-26. Folk medicine of the time believed in the therapeutic value of saliva, especially that of a famous person. Even today if we burn or cut our finger, our first impulse is to lick it or put it in our mouths.

Jesus did not need to use saliva or call for a ritual washing in a pool. Most of the time he healed simply by saying a few words. But he was also conscious of the human need of the person to have confidence in him. If he acted like a doctor at times that was to minister to a psychological need, not because he was compelled to use such methods to heal.

The Pool of Siloam was the result of a remarkable engineering feat of ancient times. In the Kedron Valley outside the city walls there was a spring named Gihon, or the Virgin's Fountain. In the time of the Jewish monarchy, an underground pipe was laid from the spring to a pool inside the city. This secret, concealed water supply would help the inhabitants of the city to withstand a siege. The pool was an open air basin about twenty by thirty feet. It was called Siloam (or sent) because it received the water "sent" to it by the Virgin's Spring. It was at this pool the blind man obtained his sight after he washed the mud from his eyes. Recall also that it was from this pool the priest drew water for the "prayer for rain" procession at Tabernacles.

After the healing there was four episodes in which a questioning or scrutiny takes place. These incidents mark four stages of spiritual growth in the healed man and four steps leading from doubt to militant disbelief on the part of the Jews. When John speaks of "the Jews" he is not talking of all Jews, but of those who were actively antagonistic to Jesus and his followers.

By the time this gospel was written, the sharp break between the Christian and Jewish communities had occurred. The heated disputes between Jesus and the religious leaders and those whom John call "the Jews" were repeated in the early church as the two faiths parted ways. The passion evident in the gospel confrontations were all too well known in the infant church. These texts about "the Jews" should not be used for anti-semitic purposes. Christians should not be anti-semitic for any reason. The Gospel is meant to foster unity between and among all peoples under God's Fatherhood.

The following chart captures the four stages of faith and disbelief just mentioned. The man in the dark comes gradually to the light both physically and spiritually. And those opposed to Jesus gradually sink into the darkness of disbelief.

The Enlightenment of the Ignorant

Blind Man

1. Questioned by neighbors.
2. Questioned by Pharisees.
3. Questioned again by Pharisees.
4. Questioned by Jesus.

His Faith Growth

It was a MAN called Jesus.
Jesus is a PROPHET.
Miracle proves Jesus is FROM GOD.
Worships Jesus as SON OF MAN.

The Ignorance of the Enlightened

Pharisees/The Jews

1. First Questioning
2. Second Questioning
3. Questioning His parents.
4. Last Interrogation of Man

Their Disbelief Growth

They accept the healing
Some willing to be convinced.
Now hostile to Jesus.
Doubt a miracle happened.
Assert he was never even blind.
No interest in truth.
They try to convict the witness of lying.

The cured man displayed increasing insight. First, he viewed Jesus as just a man. Second, he perceived him as a prophet like the miracle workers of ancient times. Third, as one from God, for who else would be behind so wonderful a deed? Lastly, he revered Jesus as Son of Man.

The Jews opposed to Jesus demonstrated a descent into cynical disbelief. They began by accepting the miracle, then doubting it, next even doubting the man was ever blind. Lastly, they discredited the testimony of the man and basically expressed their refusal to believe Jesus.

This was a contest between humility and pride, between insight and closed minds, between light and darkness. It was like the difference between people who know they do not know everything and those who think they know it all. Wisdom is the reward for the humble. Empty ignorance is the outcome for the proud. The blind man confessed his ignorance three times. Yet he was growing in knowledge of Jesus. He started in darkness and arrived at the light. The Pharisees three times boast they know all about Jesus, but progressively lapse into ignorance about him. They began in the light and ended up in darkness.

The Baptismal Character of the Story

We have already noted that early Christians called baptism the Illumination or Enlightenment. Catacomb art used this story seven times, most often as a picture of Christian baptism. Early Christian catechists employed this story as a reading to prepare converts for baptism. In a further historical development the reading was incorporated in the “great scrutiny” – a final exam for baptism. When the candidates had been finally judged ready for baptism, Old Testament readings about cleansing waters were read to them.

Next occurred the formal opening of the gospel book, John. Chapter 9 was read, which ended with the healed blind man’s confession of faith, “I do believe, Lord” (verse 38). Echoing his faith, the candidates recited the Creed. The use of saliva to anoint the eyes eventually became part of the baptismal ritual, reflecting yet another influence of the story on the sacramental ceremony.

A baptismal theme is found within the story itself. Jesus told the man to wash in the Pool of Siloam, which means “sent,” reminding the reader that Jesus so often spoke of being sent to us by the Father. The water will have healing power, just as baptismal water does by the power of the Spirit. The water from that pool was used at Tabernacles as a symbol to ask God for the creative rains that would cause new growth in the future. Jesus had stood front and center for that ceremony and identified himself as the real life giving water, a water that in sacramental terms would be baptism.

This fine, well crafted story is clearly filled with wise observations about spiritual growth based on openness to Jesus and spiritual decline founded on having a closed mind toward Jesus. It demonstrates that faith in Jesus will result in commitment to him, one that will culminate in the reception of baptism.

Only a Jesus centered faith that leads to baptism in a church community assures the kind of Christian spiritual growth envisioned by the Gospel. Some people want a Christianity without Christ, which results in a religion with no faith requirement and no moral demands. Jesus is offstage longer here than in any gospel text. Those who wish to keep him off fall into radical disbelief. The same thing happens today even within religion. People try to distract others from thinking of Jesus, praying to him, believing in him, being near him in the sacraments, especially Eucharist. The result will be a loss of faith.

The scrappy, street smart blind man of this story is the perfect antidote to any effort to blindside the faithful from contact with Jesus. This nameless man is the patron saint of Christian realists. His stubborn loyalty to Jesus opened him to strong faith. We have much to learn from him for our own faith journey.