

'Who Sinned?'

John 9:1-12, 24-41, *The Message*, Translation by Eugene Peterson

June 2, 2019

John 9:1-2: Walking down the street, Jesus saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked, “Rabbi, who sinned: this man or his parents, causing him to be born blind?” **3-5** Jesus said, “You’re asking the wrong question. You’re looking for someone to blame. There is no such cause-effect here. Look instead for what God can do. We need to be energetically at work for the One who sent me here, working while the sun shines. When night falls, the workday is over. For as long as I am in the world, there is plenty of light. I am the world’s Light.” **6-7** He said this and then spit in the dust, made a clay paste with the saliva, rubbed the paste on the blind man’s eyes, and said, “Go, wash at the Pool of Siloam” (Siloam means “Sent”). The man went and washed—and saw. **8** Soon the town was buzzing. His relatives and those who year after year had seen him as a blind man begging were saying, “Why, isn’t this the man we knew, who sat here and begged?” **9** Others said, “It’s him all right!” But others objected, “It’s not the same man at all. It just looks like him.” He said, “It’s me, the very one.” **10** They said, “How did your eyes get opened?” **11** “A man named Jesus made a paste and rubbed it on my eyes and told me, ‘Go to Siloam and wash.’ I did what he said. When I washed, I saw.”

12 “So where is he?” “I don’t know.” **24** They called the man back a second time—the man who had been blind—and told him, “Give credit to God. We know this man is an impostor.” **25** He replied, “I know nothing about that one way or the other. But I know one thing for sure: I was blind . . . I now see.” **26** They said, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?” **27** “I’ve told you over and over and you haven’t listened. Why do you want to hear it again? Are you so eager to become his disciples?” **28-29** With that they jumped all over him. “*You* might be a disciple of that man, but we’re disciples of Moses. We know for sure that God spoke to Moses, but we have no idea where this man even comes from.” **30-33** The man replied, “This is amazing! You claim to know nothing about him, but the fact is, he opened my eyes! It’s well known that God isn’t at the beck and call of sinners, but listens carefully to anyone who lives in reverence and does his will. That someone opened the eyes of a man born blind has never been heard of—ever. If this man didn’t come from God, he wouldn’t be able to do anything.” **34** They said, “You’re nothing but dirt! How dare you take that tone with us!” Then they threw him out in the street. **35** Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, and went and found him. He asked him, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” **36** The man said, “Point him out to me, sir, so that I can believe in him.” **37** Jesus said, “You’re looking right at him. Don’t you recognize my voice?” **38** “Master, I believe,” the man said, and worshiped him. **39** Jesus then said, “I came into the world to bring everything into the clear light of day, making all the distinctions clear, so that those who have never seen will see, and those who have made a great pretense of seeing will be exposed as blind.” **40** Some Pharisees overheard him and said, “Does that mean you’re calling us blind?” **41** Jesus said, “If you were really blind, you would be blameless, but since you claim to see everything so well, you’re accountable for every fault and failure.”

So, “Who Sinned?” I wish it were more ambiguous. But in Peterson’s interpretation, Jesus helps us out a little bit. “You’re asking the wrong question.” Looking for someone to blame doesn’t solve anything. “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (Romans 3:23) None of us are free from sin, we are all still learning. So the question is not so much about who sinned, but “What do we do about our sin?” What do we do about our confidence that we have it all figured out? What do we do about the mistakes we make, when we know we could ask for forgiveness, and be forgiven, but don’t really want to acknowledge what has happened and what our role is in the mistake. What we do about our sin is the larger question that still confronts us today.

Could it be that there might be some strengths in our blindness, if we are willing to give ourselves over into deepening our learning, and trusting more in God’s guidance? I remember an amazing blind friend who taught me more than I ever expected. Polly Brown was a remarkable woman, who happened to be blind. She was a member of a church I served in Ohio. But she had grown up in São Paulo, Brazil, the daughter of Mission Worker parents. Her father founded the seminary in São Paulo. So when Muskingum Valley Presbytery was exploring a future mission partnership, she was delighted to introduce three of us to a wonderful program already in progress in a village just outside of Franca, which was a 6-hour bus ride south of São Paulo. We made plans to visit in January. January is a wonderful time to go to Brazil, because it is more like summer there then.

But we had to fly out of Ohio. Polly had spent Christmas with her cousin in Miami, so we were going to meet her there. January in Ohio was not like Miami or São Paulo. The three of us flying out of Cleveland were looking at snow - lots of snow, and our flight was grounded. Oh NO! We had to meet Polly! We scurried around the airport and pleaded with anyone behind a counter who would listen to our story. We were desperate. Finally, an attendant for a different airline said he could get us on that plane. But - our connection in Miami was going to put us on a non-stop to São Paulo, NOT going through Venezuela as originally planned.

We had to make a decision. Either we took a different route to Brazil, without Polly - or we didn't go at all. Yep, we got on that airplane. This was before cell phones, and we didn't have time to contact Polly. But - we gave Polly's number to our family members, and said to let her know that she should come ahead to São Paulo, just as she had planned, and we would be waiting for her there.

We made it to São Paulo just fine. The problem was that we were three hours ahead of Polly, we did NOT speak, recognize, or know how to read any Portuguese, and we had to look inconspicuous amongst everyone in the fifth most populated city in the world in 1994 - for three hours. We did not have our blind guide! Our anxiety was high - but all we could do was trust and believe that Polly would arrive. Maybe... you can partially imagine how relieved, delighted, and overjoyed we were to see her come through the gate with the bustling throng of people also walking into the many, happy open arms at that airport.

The three of us who were not blind definitely needed to call upon some extra skills. We had a different handicap, but we weren't helpless. We needed to rely on each other, to open some new avenues, and create some new learnings in a time of stress.

The church is definitely on a learning curve now. I learn a lot and appreciate greatly some of the younger authors who take practicing their faith seriously, but who are not afraid to confront its problems, and yes - sometimes its sins. About five years ago, Lillian Daniels, a bright, creative theologian wrote a wonderful book for all of us, but especially those who take the position that coming to church is not necessary.

Lillian Daniels, *When "Spiritual but Not Religious" Is Not Enough*, 2014

Reminds me of an old saying: "God wants spiritual fruit, not religious nuts." We need to be careful not to go riding off into the wild, believing we have everything all figured out. We might miss the spiritual nuances hidden within the puzzle of life, or we might miss the religious structure that keeps us connected and supported through our misunderstandings and confusion. Spirituality and religion go together.

There are many great things going on at Cook's Memorial Presbyterian Church. But sometimes we struggle to offer faith in a way that is inviting. How do we say we have something here we want to share with you? How do we live out the Good News of Jesus Christ in a way that leads others to want to walk with us?

I heard another story of how some strict rules might have prevented someone from grasping the big picture of how God works in our lives. There was a volunteer helping with bible school. The lesson was about how Jonah was swallowed and lived in the belly of a great fish for three days. The volunteer happened to be a science teacher, and she suggested this was a story to illustrate how important it is to listen to God and to do what God tells us to do. But there was one little boy in the class who insisted that Jonah was really swallowed by a great whale. The teacher tried to focus on the message, but the little boy was adamant about this fish. Then he told the teacher that when he died and went to heaven, he was going to ask Jonah what happened. The teacher asked the boy, "What if Jonah went to hell?" The little boy responded: "Then you can ask him!"

Yeah, I laughed, too. Sadly, though, I think this is an unfortunate story. Once we have learned something, and are so unwilling to question the likelihood of its reality, we close ourselves off to a broader experience. Sometimes the age is reversed, but the locked heart is the same. When Sr. Joan Chittister was a child in school, her teacher told her that because her father was not Catholic, he might be going to hell. Sr. Joan replied: "You don't know my father."

"Who sinned?" We all have, and we will again. We all also know we will be held accountable. What we need to remember is that we can trust Jesus to lead us through the darkness and the blindness. We hold a depth of faith that is beyond the religious rules, but is guided by them at the same time. When we can look at ourselves, and recognize our sin, it can actually make us more alive. Allow yourself to ask: "We are not blind, are we?" and see what might be revealed.