

“People Unclear on the Concept  
Based on John 9: 1-41  
by Rev. Meghan Davis  
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Who sinned that I have come to suffer this injury? Me or my parents? My sister would say the sin was mine: using a knife incorrectly. But I’m pretty sure I’m innocent and my parents must be to blame somehow.

Of course, in modern times, we would never think to blame a physical ailment on the sins of the victim, much less on the sins of the parents. Or would we? Actually, there are many diseases that we do tend to blame on the sins of the patient. AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases and infections come to mind. Lung cancer and other diseases related to smoking and tobacco use. Various illnesses caused by poor nutrition, lack of exercise and other unhealthy lifestyle choices. The more we know about the causes of medical problems, the more we know that while some things simply happen and we don’t know why, our actions and choices do impact our overall well-being. But even though, for the most part, we do not blame birth defects on the sin of the parent, much less the sin of the child, perhaps we are not as evolved as we like to think. Perhaps we are not so very different from First Century people.

I used to know someone whose parents both died of AIDS. He had a lot of anger because whenever people learned that fact, they would ask which parent infected the other. How did he or she get it? What difference does it make, he asked. They’re both dead. What business is it of yours? And why do we really need to know “who sinned” to cause a particular malady? Isn’t it usually to make us feel better? We want to assure ourselves that we won’t get it. We want to assure ourselves that the world is predictable and fair and if we just follow the rules, we’ll be ok. And if that comfort comes at the expense of telling or at least implying to someone that they somehow did something to deserve what they are going through, then so be it. If the person ends up ostracized from society for their illness, so be it. If we are the sick person and can find a way to blame someone else for what we are going through, anyone as long as *I’m* not to blame, then so be it.

To take the blame game a dreadful step further, there is a cannibalistic tribe in Papua New Guinea. When the tribe experiences some form of hardship that they are trying to get through, a victim is chosen to be sacrificed based on a belief that that particular person is responsible for that hardship. It is both punishment for the person and appeasement for the gods. This is the ultimate in scape-goating.

Luckily for the blind man and his parents, no one was blaming them for the hardships faced by the Jewish people under Roman occupation. But they did believe that someone, either parents or the man, surely sinned to bring the blindness with which he was born. This gave people comfort in believing that if they did not sin they and their children would be spared. It also justified keeping the blind man an outsider, not including him in society.

I can't help but get a kick out of this story. It sounds like a sitcom. Jesus and his disciples are walking along and they see a man who had been blind since birth. The disciples ask Jesus, "who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answers, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him." He goes on to further confuse matters saying, "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."

Then Jesus spits on the ground, makes mud with the saliva and spreads the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam." Now, I'm thinking this would have taken the man by surprise considering he and Jesus hadn't spoken to each other at all. Unlike most healing stories, the blind man didn't ask to be healed. He's just sitting there, minding his own business when suddenly he hears people talking about whether he or his parents sinned, then the next thing he knows, someone is rubbing spit-mud on his eyes and telling him to go wash it off. Sure enough, he goes and washes (I would, too, if for no other reason than to wash the mud off my face) then he comes back able to see.

But the healing is not the end of the story. It's not even the point of the story. The healing is eclipsed by the back and forth of the Pharisees wanting to know who did what. They aren't exactly sure what wrong has been done but they know that someone is stepping into their realm of religious authority and they don't like it. They miss the point of the healing: the glory of God and the significance of Jesus. As scholar Karoline Lewis notes, "The actual healing itself is narrated very succinctly, because it is not the miracle that is the critical point. Rather, as a sign, it points to something beyond itself, to what an encounter with Jesus signifies."<sup>1</sup>

When the man gets back from the pool, no one recognizes him now that he can see and he isn't begging. "Isn't this the man who used to sit and beg?" They talk about him, in front of him as if he weren't there, or as if he's deaf now instead of blind. "I am the man," he says. Some say, "It is he," still talking about him in the third person. "Yes, I am the man." Others say, "No, it's not him but it is someone like him." He keeps saying, "I am the man. I am the man. I am the man."

Finally they acknowledge him and say, "Then how were your eyes opened?" He tells them, "It was the strangest thing. 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." You would think that the people would be blown away by the fact that this guy who was blind all his life can suddenly see. But now all they want to know is, "Where is this Jesus?" How should he know? Last time he saw Jesus, he was blind. Jesus sent him to the pool to wash off and then went another way.

So the people bring the Pharisees to the man formerly known as blind. Turns out it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. The Pharisees ask him how he had received his sight. He says to them, "For the hundredth time, he put mud on my

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<sup>1</sup> Karoline M. Lewis, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 2 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 119.

eyes. Then I washed, and now I see.” Again, unimpressed by the miracle, or as John puts it, the “sign” some of the Pharisees are all upset about the sabbath thing saying, “This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath.” But others say, “How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?” And they are divided. They ask the man, “What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.” He man says, “He is a prophet.”

But still there are some who remain unconvinced. They don’t believe that he had been blind and had received his sight so they call the parents of the man who had received his sight and ask them, “Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?” His parents answer, “Yes this is our son. Yes he used to be blind but now sees. But we don’t know how he got his sight or who did it. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.” And the author of John tells us that his parents said this because they were afraid of the authorities and that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue.

So they call the poor guy again. This man who probably was lucky to have two words spoken to him in the course of a day when he was a beggar is suddenly facing an inquisition. This time they say, “Give glory to God for healing you instead of this Jesus because we know that this man is a sinner.” The man answers, “Listen, I do not know whether or not he is a sinner. All I know is that though I was blind, now I see.” Again they ask, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?” He answers 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?” The Pharisees are not amused. They revile him, saying, “You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.” Then this ordinary, nobody of a man teaches the educated religious experts a theological lesson, “Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. 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.” That really makes the Pharisees mad. How dare he? They answer him, “You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?” And they drive him out.

But Jesus hears about it and tracks the man down. He asks the man, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” The man answers, “And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.” Jesus says, “You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.” The man responds, “Lord, I believe.” And he worships him. Jesus says, “I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.” Some of the Pharisees near him hear this and say to him, “Surely we are not blind, are we?” Jesus says, “If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.”

Like the Samaritan woman at the well, from last week’s scripture, the blind man’s understanding about who Jesus is grows over time. While her understanding grew during the course of a conversation with Jesus, his understanding occurs through his own witness about his encounter with Jesus. As a result of answering repeated questions about his healing, he

progresses from calling him “the man Jesus,” to calling him a prophet and then a man “from God,” and ultimately worships him as the Son of Man.

Karoline Lewis explains that “The blind man is more than one whom Jesus heals; he is one of Jesus’ sheep, a member of the fold, a disciple. Like the sheep, the blind man hears Jesus’ voice. Like a shepherd, Jesus finds the blind man when he has been cast out (v. 35). Jesus provides for the man born blind much more than sight. He provides for him what he, as the good shepherd, gives all of his sheep: the protection of his fold, the blessing of needed pasture, and the gift of abundant life. As a result, hearing and seeing are much more than ways by which one recognizes or believes in Jesus. They are, in fact, expressions of relationship with Jesus, and relationship with the Father.”<sup>2</sup>

As a blind man, he was estranged from society. In society but an outsider, not really a part of society. Known only for his disability: the blind man who begs out in front of the synagogue, or city gates or wherever it happened to be. The people were so blind to who he actually was, to his personhood beyond being the blind man that they cannot recognize him when he is no longer blind, no longer begging. But in healing the man’s vision, Jesus also heals the community. The man is integrated back into society, albeit awkwardly. He is able to re-create his relationship with his community even while creating a relationship with Jesus and with God.

But sight isn’t the only important sense in this story. After all, the man hears Jesus long before he sees him. He hears Jesus and obeys his command to go and wash in the pool of Siloam. And ultimately, that is what we are all called to. We are all called to hear and obey Christ’s command. We are all called to the healing that Christ offers. We are all called to witness to the healing signs of Christ in our lives. We are all called to community with one another, with Jesus and with God.

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<sup>2</sup> Karoline M. Lewis, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 2 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 121.