

Fourth Sunday in Lent

Pride Becomes Blindness, Blindness Becomes Servanthood

John 9:1-41

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Analysis by James Squire

1As he 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.

Author's Note: Jo-Ann Brant, a Johannine scholar at Goshen College, who says that "Essentially, the story of the man with blindness serves as a miniature version of the larger story of Jesus. The narrative of the healed man parallels Jesus' narrative in many ways, including the following: the crowd questions his identity (9:8-9), he asserts 'I am' (9:9), he speaks frankly and logically throughout but is treated as an invalid witness (9:18), he is accused of being a sinner, and he combats the Pharisees with sarcasm and truth (9:34). This story within the story heightens the ironic punchline of the episode—that those who think they can see are blind to the truth while the one who was blind (and a sinner and accused of being an invalid witness) is the one who sees." We are also meant to see "how followers of Jesus might go on after he has left the stage of earth: like the healed man, they should imitate Jesus as a bold witness to the truth despite opposition."



By Eustache Le Sueur – Christ Healing the Blind Man, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=4204876>

The Pharisees have no satisfactory answer to their ultimate dilemma: a blind man can now see because of Jesus' intervention. "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" All the evasion cannot make this question go away. This simple miracle punctures the authority of the Pharisees in this story, and they show no signs of acknowledging their own blindness.

DIAGNOSIS: Blind Leader

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Leadership by Gatekeeping

A man has his sight restored on the Sabbath by a rival to us, the existing religious authorities, and the healed man dares to lecture us about it. He does not know his proper place. Unauthorized healing is prohibited in our establishment. Moreover, no straight answer is provided by any respectable witness to get to the bottom of this mystery. The man's own parents are elusive and secretive. No one is respecting us. And our rival is not taking responsibility for his effrontery. He is not even showing himself, except to talk trash about us after the healing. Why is everyone blind to our authority?

Spitting on authority is generally a form of blindness, but authority figures can also be blind to the truth they are charged with safeguarding. "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs" fades, and the authorities' glaring need to be the final stamp of approval on any good thing that happens takes center stage. Leaders have a tendency to become gatekeepers rather than servants, making it necessary sometimes for renegades to intervene.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Only Gatekeepers Are Worthy of Trust

Frankly, this man is a sinner whose testimony is not to be trusted. Why else was he born blind? Is this not what we teach, that calamity befalls those who have strayed from the path? A sinner healing a sinner? This is not how things are done. The blind leading the blind, indeed. Who knows what sorcery was involved. God, through Moses, put us in charge, and we will get to the bottom of this if it is the last thing we do. No one gives glory to God except through us—that is our function in this world, to be Moses to these people. This interloper cutting corners is not to be trusted.

"Power corrupts"—so the trusty saying goes. Leaders believe

their own hype. Facts that contradict such hype are rationalized away. (“We know this man is a sinner.” “You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?”) Today we call this “confirmation bias.” More importantly, such leaders—especially within the church—impose their own will as if it were God’s.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Gatekeepers Suffer Terminal Blindness

“Your sin remains.” The nerve of this interloper! We interpret what sin is, not him. If he is going to go around healing people on the Sabbath in defiance of our authority, we will deal with him once and for all. People will know who is in charge here. Interlopers can go to hell.

Tough talk—if you can back it up. In fact, that is what it comes down to. Who has the real authority from God? The Pharisees have no satisfactory answer to their ultimate dilemma: a blind man can now see because of Jesus’ intervention. “How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?” All the evasion cannot make this question go away. This simple miracle punctures the authority of the Pharisees in this story, and they show no signs of acknowledging their own blindness.



Jesus healing the blind XIX c. Brashlyan

PROGNOSIS: Sighted Servants

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Jesus Pays the Price for Our Blindness

This interloper, Jesus, has a very interesting way of

demonstrating godly authority. He is not approved by the religious authorities of his day. They exercise their earthly authority to punish him for his offense. Under Roman occupation, this leads to his death because Rome has a vested interest in quelling any possible religious turmoil. He never apologizes for his ministry among them. He never stops butting heads with them, even as they put him on trial. But he also will refuse to marshal an armed insurrection (18:36) to free himself. He will argue all the way to the cross, but he will go there all the same and die. He will meet his apparent end with the declaration: "It is finished" (19:30). Having given sight to the man born blind, he is done in by those who call him blind, but he insists that his mission statement (3:16ff) has been accomplished.

When the tomb is discovered to be empty and Mary is greeted by the risen Jesus (20:16), those who have had their eyes opened by him know that he was right in his dying declaration. Moreover, they know that their sin does not remain. It has been wiped clean just as surely as their eyes have been opened by Jesus (v. 41).

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Jesus Earns Our Trust through Service

When our eyes are opened by Jesus, we recognize that we were previously blind. We can see him. Like Mary outside the tomb, we hear his voice and follow him because we know him (10:4). Moreover, when people question us about who opened our eyes, we testify freely (vv. 9-11) without fear of reprisal, because we belong to the Good Shepherd (John 10). If church authorities question us, we testify freely (vv. 15-17) without fear, even when others in the community may not support us fully (vv. 22-23). We cannot be frightened into silence about Jesus because his light cannot be overcome by the darkness in our

world (1:5).

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Leadership by Healing Service

Leading in a worldly fashion is quite the burden. If you are not willing to use force, it can be a disaster. If you are, it can easily become a joke. But with eyes opened by Jesus, we follow him and lead according to his example, which means servant leadership of the type exhibited by Jesus in John 9. We risk the ire of power-hungry people who prioritize protocol over service. We may even risk punishment to facilitate Jesus' ministry among those who walk in blindness. We do not seek to ruffle feathers intentionally, but when we see a need, we do what we can to address it, and put up with the fallout if there is any—just as Jesus addressed a need and then dealt with the blowback. Most importantly, we make the story about the one being healed instead of ourselves. Our Good Shepherd is nowhere to be found from verse 8 through verse 34—after the blind man is healed, and until he is “driven out.” The bulk of the story is the blind man living his newfound freedom in the midst of a hostile world, seeing clearly what the so-called leaders cannot. Jesus returns at the end to encourage him and support him. That is the kind of servant Jesus frees us to be.