

## 02.15.26 Worship Service

### Who Are You Calling Blind? John 9 Pastor Lois Harder

For several years now I've accompanied my mom to see Dr. Weishaar at the Vitreoretinal Clinic in Wichita where she goes regularly for injections in her eye. I know some of you have also experienced this treatment – to try to slow the effects of Macular Degeneration. I confess, the thought of getting a shot in my eyeball seems perfectly horrid to me. But I watch my mom bravely look up and endure, first the numbing shot and then the needle that contains the medicine – it's inspirational as she hardly flinches. I only asked her once at the first appointment, "Mom! How can you stand that?" And without flinching or hesitating, she replied, "I'm grateful! These shots are medical miracles that can hopefully prevent me from losing any more of my vision!" And she was right, of course. These years later we're grateful that her vision is fairly stable.

Since this morning's text is quite a long narrative I'd like to divide it into small sections and touch on each section briefly. I'll reflect a bit on the biblical, cultural aspects and then try to bring each section into our own life and times. Delton will put the sections of scripture up on the screen as I'm talking about each one.

#### First, verses 1-5

I don't recall anyone asking about my mom, "Who sinned, this woman or her parents that she was born with the traits that caused Macular Degeneration?" And yet, it seems to be a part of the human condition, the need to understand who's at fault when bad things happen. In a way, it's easy to understand. There's a sense of security (albeit a false one) when we can find some rhyme or reason for why things happen. If we can come up with some patterns or ideas that seem to follow logic or rules, then perhaps we can avoid having the bad things happen to us – if we just follow the rules. But, of course, we all know that life doesn't often work that way.

In this story it's Jesus' disciples who ask the question, "Who sinned so that he was born blind, this man or his parents?" And without hesitation Jesus replies, "Neither!" It's interesting that the disciples didn't even seem to consider the possibility of this man's needs or his healing. They were steeped (as we all are) in their cultural milieu in which this question about sin seemed to be the most significant thing for them to focus on.

But Jesus did not affirm their assumption that someone had to have sinned in order for this man to have been born blind – in fact he blew that assumption right out of the water, didn't even give it a second thought. In fact, he gave them a completely new lens through which to look at this situation. This is not about fault – it's no one's fault. It's about God's power and how it can be shown here.

How often does this happen for us? When something goes wrong or badly, we try to find fault or somewhere to lay the blame. It was the surgeon's fault that the healing process didn't go well. It was my co-worker's fault for not covering the bases adequately. It was my boss' fault for not having strong enough leadership skills. It was that customer service agent's fault for not knowing enough about the product. It was my parents' fault; they didn't bring me up properly... But the light that Jesus sheds is that asking who's to blame, is not the right question. Rather, let's focus on what the healing power of God might do in this situation?

### Second, verses 6-7

Spit was a big deal in ancient times. There was a lot of superstitious belief in the healing power of the saliva of well-known people. Both in Jewish religious belief and in the secular Greek culture, spittle was believed to have magical power. By Jesus using his spit to make mud, he was putting himself squarely within the human, earthly dimension of the situation. He was making it clear that he was in their midst as one of them, doing what they might have expected a healer to do. After he had spread the mud on the man's eyes, Jesus told him to go and wash in the pool of Siloam which was a mikveh – a cleansing pool. This scenario would have registered immediately with those who were hearing and witnessing this story because it would have reminded them of Naaman being healed of his leprosy by following Elisha's instructions to go and wash in the Jordan River. So, clearly this ritual of cleansing had been around for hundreds of years and was important in the Jewish tradition. It was one of the laws. But Jesus had already done the healing! Why would the cleansing have been important? What was the point? Maybe precisely to follow the law – but what was the purpose of the law? The ritual cleansing was to be done in the presence of a temple priest so that the priest could attest to the healing – to give witness to God's power AND to return the healed person back to their rightful place within the community. The cleansing was the public part of the healing – the part that healed the relationships and brought the whole person back to belonging. We don't really have rituals like this do we? Opportunities to celebrate publicly when someone has come through a series of medical treatments or a long illness or when someone has served a jail sentence and they're released... I wonder what a ritual celebration like that could look like?

### Third, verses 8-17

Here we learn that the man used to be a beggar – but apparently he isn't that anymore! "The man's neighbors and those who used to see him when he was a beggar said, "Isn't this the man who used to sit and beg?" The NRSV says, "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?" They didn't recognize him if he was anything other than a beggar. Being a blind beggar had become his entire identity – and the only thing people "saw" when they looked at him. So much so that they kept asking the same questions... Isn't this the guy that used to sit and beg? Some said, "Yeah!" while others said, "No, no... it's just somebody that kinda looks like him." Even when the fella said, "Yes! It's ME!", the next question was equally incredulous – "Well... what happened? How'd you do it?" And, "Where is this guy that you claim healed you?" And over the course of the next 16 verses people just keep asking him (and his parents) that question. And he and the parents keep answering, "We don't know." We don't know how. And we don't know where he is. We just know that it happened. And the healed man kept repeating... I was blind, I was a beggar, this guy named Jesus made some mud, put it on my eyes and told me to go wash. I did that. And now I can see. And guess what? I'm not a beggar anymore. And I was never just a beggar. Are you interested in knowing anything else about me? Who I am? What I can do? What I think about? What gifts I might bring to this community? No one seemed interested in any of that. Only in knowing what kind of "sinner" might have dared to claim to be the Light of the world, to have the healing power of God AND to do all of that on the Sabbath. It was beyond the pale. They could only think of who to blame. They could not reach for the joy, the gratitude, they could not celebrate with this man that he was restored in the most full sense of the word.

When we can only see people in one dimension, we rob them of their ability to be fully who they are. This afternoon there will be a memorial and a service of celebration for the life of Claude Frey. Claude was someone who was often only seen in one dimension. But for the last several years of his life he had a very special friend who was able to recognize so much more in him than that one dimensional reputation that he had. I believe that as Claude and his friend learned to know and trust one another they also learned to “see” one another much more clearly – the goodness that each of them carried in their hearts. The faithfulness and love of God that they shared. Claude and his friend learned from one another because they took time to look beyond the surface of “what people thought” to the deeper humanity that they shared. Like the blind man in our story Claude was more than what met the eye. His friend saw that – and helped in his healing.

#### Fourth, verses 18-23

The Jewish leaders didn’t believe the healed man’s testimony. So they summoned his parents to interrogate them. How often is there a strong resistance to believing the testimony of someone who’s thought of as invalid to begin with. Judges and juries are often suspicious of the testimony of a young black man who says he didn’t commit the crime he’s been accused of. We often don’t believe women who say they’ve been abused by powerful, wealthy men. We sometimes don’t believe children who tell us that someone they know has hurt them – sometimes in ways that are irreparable. It seems that for those who hold power, it can often be more important to lay blame than to listen carefully. Why is that? Well... there are likely lots of reasons, but just to name a couple of possibilities – careful listening takes time. It’s not at all efficient. And typically power holders are in a hurry. They need to get things done as efficiently and quickly as possible. Another reason it might be difficult to listen carefully is because it often leads to messy circumstances. Careful listening often produces multiple perspectives. Once that happens, it can get pretty dicey to try to figure out who’s to blame – fact is, there’s usually plenty of blame to go around.

In our story this morning though, it seems that fear was a strong part of the reason for why careful listening was difficult. The Jewish leaders doubted the word of the blind man himself so they badgered his parents. The parents, so far, had not lost their place in the community – they were still members in good standing. But they were afraid. They risked losing their place and being shunned – just as their son had been – if they gave a strong and truthful testimony about Jesus’ power to heal.

Fear can be a very strong and a very real motivator. And it can really get in the way of truth-telling and careful listening.

#### Fifth, verses 24-34

By this point in the story, the leaders are pretty frustrated , so they tried the tack of threats and putting words in the man’s mouth. Ironically, they threatened him with the very thing he was doing! “Give glory to God!”, they demanded, assuming that he was blaspheming as he gave credit to Jesus for having healed him. Little did they know that he WAS giving glory to God! Then they threw their certainty at him, which was the absolute threat. “We KNOW this man is a sinner!” Implied was, “And you’d better say you know it too!” But once you’ve seen the Light and experienced the Truth, once you’ve felt the Love of God, you’ve got nothing to lose by giving yourself to it. There’s nothing to lose in speaking the Truth

and nothing to lose in challenging the powers. But even so... they still castigated him, yelled at him and, in the end, they expelled him.

God's love will hold us fast in the face of all sorts of evil. But that doesn't mean we won't have to face it.

#### Sixth and seventh, verses 35-41

As the powers and principalities work so hard to stay in control in our world, Jesus comes and finds those who are being mistreated, overlooked, misunderstood, attacked, expelled. And in his upside-down kingdom way, he is always reminding us that he came into the world "so that those who don't see can see and those who are certain of what they see are actually blind." Let us keep our vision clear and our eyes clearly fixed on him so that we know how to move through this world as his hands and feet, his ears and heart, shining his Light, showing his Love, testifying to the healing power of God.