

“No Limits on Love”  
Psalm 23, John 9: 1-41  
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Throughout the season of Lent, we explore some of the most intriguing stories from gospel of John. Today we hear another healing story where Jesus restores the sight to a man born blind. This story is a one act play in several scenes with a huge cast of characters: disciples, neighbors, Pharisees, parents, Jesus and of course, the blind man. On the surface there doesn't seem to be much controversy. Jesus encounters a blind man on the Sabbath. In typical fashion, he cures him, without hesitation, analysis, or concern for any consequences to himself. Instead of rejoicing in this miracle, the Pharisees focus on details, rules and regulations. They are quick to label both Jesus and the blind man sinners. Jesus is a sinner because he violates Jewish codes by healing on the Sabbath and the man because he was born blind. Now it is up to us to discern where sin really lies in this story.

John tells this story to the early Christian community struggling in Jesus' absence. The early church faced a world that was often hostile, antagonistic even dangerous. Through this story John invites us to face own blindness, to discover where and how we get hooked, ignoring what is truly important to focus on what others think is important. John tells the community that to be a follower of Jesus means you are will encounter trouble as often as you receive a blessing. There were many people who were suspicious of Jesus, who did not believe what he professed, who wanted him to stop what he was doing. He was a dangerous man, eating with sinners, healing people against their will, and willing to cross gender and cultural boundaries to the dismay of those who worked diligently to keep those boundaries intact.

The drama unfolds in four scenes. In scene one (vv. 8-12) the healed man tries to go home again but can not. He is met with fear and suspicion instead of celebration. After all, he is no longer the object of their pity or good will. He is now one of them. What does this mean? How did this happen? Who would have the power to do such a thing? This miracle shakes their long held perceptions of sin and grace. If this man were blind he must be a sinner or at least his parents must have sinned. Now, with a spit and a pat their world-view changes.

In scene two (vv. 13-17) the healed man is hauled before the religious authorities. Jesus has opposed the authorities again by working on the Sabbath. The formerly blind man understands Jesus must be a man of God or he would not have the power to heal him. He doesn't care whose rules have been broken. He is merely grateful for being the beneficiary of this miracle. The Pharisees don't see it quite the same way. Jesus has willfully disregarded the rules. Jesus came not to follow the rules, but to establish life-giving relationships. If rules prevent us from showing mercy or love or compassion, then they are foolish rules. When he sees someone who needs to be healed, he heals them regardless of the time or place or circumstances.

In scene three (vv. 18-23) the Pharisees drag the parents of the formerly blind man in to get to the bottom of the controversy. They dutifully answer the Pharisee's questions. Yes he is our son; yes, he was born blind; no, we don't know how this miracle happened or who did it. Ask him yourself if you need to know. We had nothing to do with it. Instead of rejoicing, they are fearful of what might happen to them. This act of kindness has turned their whole world upside down, in ways they would never have expected. They don't know anything about Jesus except that he has brought unexpected chaos to their lives.

So often we get trapped as people in this community were trapped. Instead of accepting a miracle as a miracle, we start asking questions. We get caught up in the minutia and lose the point. When Jesus encounters someone who is ill, he heals him. When someone is grieving he comforts her. When someone has been left out, he includes him. When someone is denied justice, he acts to bring justice. He does not stop to ask questions. He does not consult the presumed authorities. He does not stop to wonder if there is some law against it. He simply responds out of this boundless love for all people. He is teaching his disciples that this is how they ought to respond. John warns people that if they take their discipleship seriously, they may find themselves in similar hot water. Are they ready to accept both the cost and joy of discipleship? Are we? There will always be those who question our motives, who do not believe, who seek some logical explanation, who try to keep us from doing what we know to be the right thing. None of this matters if we respond out of love.

In the final scene (vv. 24-34) the man is grilled for a second time by the authorities, this time more intensely. With irrefutable evidence of this healing, the Pharisees try to get this man to denounce Jesus as a sinner. The formerly blind man says that surely a sinner could not have performed such an act of mercy and compassion. Therefore, he must not be a sinner. Angry and frustrated, the Pharisees throw up their hands, denounce this man and Jesus and expelled them both as sinners. Now, freshly healed but facing a whole new set of challenges, the man sets out to seek his place in the world. With his family and community now fearful of what might happen to them, he must trust Jesus and the disciples to be his new family.

This story raises many intriguing questions. I am drawn to the dialogue between Jesus and the disciples. Their questions are similar to ones we might ask. Jesus, can we find someone to blame for this man being blind? Can we find someone to blame when a young person is killed or a loved one dies unexpectedly or a marriage becomes irretrievably broken? Jesus assured them that this man's blindness was not the result of sin. Instead, he tells them that healing this man gives Jesus the chance to glorify God who is the source of his healing power. God does not make people sick or wounded so they can be used as teaching tools. God gives us the power to heal, perhaps not as Jesus did, but the power to make fractured relationships whole or to relieve a person's fear or to bring comfort to one that suffers. Whenever we do these things, we bring glory to God. This happens not because we are powerful, but because God is working through us as instruments of hope, healing, reconciliation and love.

Often when tragedy strikes someone says, “everything happens for a reason.” Perhaps this is a way to help them accept a situation that can not be explained. We want logical explanations, but unexpected death or a sudden diagnosis or natural disasters leave us feeling vulnerable and frightened. It is hard to accept an unexplained tragedy like the death of Kenneth Joyce, the 13 year old boy who died recently in a skiing accident. Perhaps there is some comfort in thinking there is a reason for this. When things happen that make God grieve, I believe it becomes an occasion to witness to the miracle of love that is expressed by the community. Miracles happen over and over again in the wake of such tragedies, but God does not will for such things to happen.

Everything does happen for a reason and more often than not, we do not understand those reasons. It takes deep theological pondering and prayer to fathom the reasoning of God. There are some things that we will never understand. That is when we grow impatient, testing instead of trusting God, insisting that God respond in our time, instead of God’s time. Wisdom comes whenever we are willing to sit in the deep mystery of not knowing. The blind man did not know why he had been born blind. He did not understand why he was in the presence of Jesus that day so that he could be healed. He was not sure where his life would go now that he was able to see. There were still so many things to ponder. Yet he understood enough to know that with his newly found sight came incredible wisdom. In fact, he not only could he now see, but fully understand who Jesus was.

Whenever the light goes on and we step out of the darkness, our lives change. This man did not have the answers to all his questions; however, he understood enough to know that Jesus was not a sinner any more than he was. He was the recipient of Jesus’ boundless love and that was a gift as great as his restored sight. Now he could truly see, now he could fully participate as a beloved child of God. Jesus says, stop questioning; stop trying to figure it all out and follow. The mysteries of God will be revealed to us whenever we respond in love. May it be so! Amen

Source:

Fred Craddock, “Coping in Jesus’ Absence,” *Christian Century*, March 14, 1990, p. 275.