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Bridgeway Church
Gospel of John #29
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Sermon Summary #29

I Once was Blind, but Now I See John 9:1-41

I'm asking you to do something today that may strike you as odd, but bear with me. I want all of you to close your eyes and not to open them until I tell you to do so. Now, try to envision in your mind what it's like to be **blind from birth**. How would it feel never to have seen anything? Not the words on the pages of your Bible. Not the shoes on your feet. Not the smile on a friend's face. Not a star in the sky above. Nothing. Just darkness. It's a terrifying thought, but try.

Keep your eyes closed. Unable to see, you're unable to work. So, you survive by begging. The problem is, you don't even know what food looks like. There's no way to tell if the object placed in your hand by a passerby is a rotten peach or a ripe kiwi. Who put it there, a man or woman? Were they repulsed by your condition or happy to see you? You'll never know, because rarely does anyone ask how you're doing or show an interest in your opinion on world affairs. Every day, day after day, you sit enveloped by darkness with nothing to do but listen to the voices around you and hope that a few people will have compassion.

Then one day, a day that started out like all the others . . . in darkness, you hear a group of men talking about you. Their words are familiar. You've heard them before, but they still cut deeply into your soul. Suddenly, another voice, one you've never heard before, rises above the others. This voice is devoid of blame and accusations, a voice filled not with questions but answers, a voice that resonates with love and understanding and . . . power.

Suddenly, without warning, you feel something warm on your eyes. Is someone playing a practical joke? Over the years you've come to expect insensitive teenagers making fun of your condition. They'd hit you and run away, laughing. Sometimes they'd throw things. You tried to act as if it didn't matter, but it did. Are they at it again? Instinctively, you reach up to touch your eyes . . . it's gooey and wet.

"For heaven's sake! Someone's put mud on my eyes."

Before you can react or say anything else, there's that voice again.

"Go," he says, "and wash in the pool of Siloam."

Why the pool of Siloam? If he cares, why doesn't he just wipe them clean himself, especially if he's the one who put it there? But, then, it beats begging. After enlisting the help of a friend, you make your way, stumbling, to the pool. Bending over, you wash the muddy mess from your eyes, still wondering whose voice it was and why he said what he did. You can open your eyes now.

"What! I can see! I can see!"

For the very first time, ever, you can see! Forty years of blindness, gone in an instant. Forty years of darkness and groping and despair and anger, washed away in the cool waters of Siloam. No one can guess what thoughts must have rushed through the mind of this man. I can't imagine how he processed the light, the colors, the shapes, the sizes of all the things that he had, at most, only touched and heard about all those years. How would someone even describe "colors" to a person who had never seen one? How do you define "blue"? You can't tell them it's the color of the sky. Don't forget: they've never seen the sky! You can't tell them that "red" is like blood because they've never seen blood!

Perhaps the friend who led him by the hand to the Pool of Siloam also led him back to where he spent so many years begging for food. "There's where you sat," fumbling for words as he gasps in disbelief at what his own eyes tell him.

He sees faces for the first time and begins to connect them to the voices he heard every day. The people stare intently, pointing at his face.

“Is this the one who sat here begging for food?”

“Yes! Of course, it is.”

“No,” say others. “The beggar was blind. It must be a twin brother we never knew about. Blind people don’t just start seeing! That sort of thing just doesn’t happen.”

“No, it’s me!” he shouts aloud. “I’m the one! I’m the beggar. I used to be blind but now I can see. This man put mud on my eyes and told me to wash in the pool of Siloam and I did and look, I can see!”

Finding the man who was responsible suddenly becomes the only thing of importance. He and his friends were debating whose sin had caused him to be blind in the first place. No doubt the beggar used to wonder about it himself. Who screwed up? Mom? Dad? Grandma? Or was it that uncle he never cared much about. Somehow, it really doesn’t matter anymore. All he can remember is that man saying something about blindness and the glory of God. He’s not sure how they relate, but Wow! He can see! There will be plenty of time to theologize later on. Right now, there’s too much to look at. So much lost time to make up.

“Boy, it sure is bright! Is that blue or brown? Oh well, soon enough I’ll know which is what.”

Who sinned, that this man should be born blind?

Let’s pause for a moment and start at the beginning of the passage. We know this man must have heard Jesus and his disciples discussing his condition. We see in vv. 2-3 that the disciples assumed, as did most other Jews of their day, that sin and suffering were directly connected in a one-to-one, cause-and-effect relationship. In one sense, sin and suffering are connected. It is because Adam sinned that suffering entered into this world. But it is wrong to move from a statement about the origin of human suffering in general to a specific connection between suffering now and some particular sin that a person may have committed.

On occasion in the NT we see that some specific sin can lead to suffering. We saw this in John 5:14 and it is also seen in 1 Corinthians 11:30 (cf. James 5:13ff.). But often there is no direct connection between sin and suffering. The case of Job would be the best example (see also 2 Cor. 12:7ff.). This story in John 9 is another instance where a man’s suffering is unrelated to any particular sin that he committed.

So, why did the disciples try to make a connection between sin and this man’s suffering? Some point to the story of Rebekah’s pregnancy in the OT. We read in Genesis 25:22 that the twin boys, Jacob and Esau, “struggled together within her.” This suggested that unborn babies are active and might commit what we would call “prenatal sin.” Others point to Exodus 20:5 where we read that God may visit “the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me.” But Jesus immediately puts to rest all such speculation:

“It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him” (John 9:3).

The word translated “that” is important. It could point to *result*, hence: “but *with the result that* the works of God might be displayed in him.” Or it could point to *purpose*, hence: “but *in order that* the works of God might be displayed in him.” In either case, John is convinced that *blindness from birth was not outside the sweep of God’s control*.

Our Lord’s point in vv. 4-5 seems to be that as long as it is day, i.e., as long as I am physically present with you, shining forth as the light of the world, we must work the works of God. The day is coming when Jesus will go away and the disciples will feel as if darkness has engulfed them. This isn’t to say that such work ends when Jesus leaves, but when compared with what it was like while Jesus was present, it seems like darkness.

So why did Jesus spit in the dirt and make a mud ball? That in itself is weird enough, but then to spread the mud on the eyes of the blind man is even stranger still! In Mark 7:33 Jesus spit and touched the tongue of a man with a speech

impediment. In Mark 8:23 Jesus “spit on” the “eyes” of a blind man and healed him. Honestly, we don’t know why. Some argue that people in that day believed saliva had healing power. But if so, why also the mud? We know from Genesis 2:7 that God created Adam from the dust of the ground. Perhaps this story in John 9 is likewise something of a “creative” act.

It may be that Jesus applied mud to his eyes as a way of doubly intensifying his blindness. It’s as if Jesus is saying, “I’m going to make this miracle even more difficult.” You may recall that this is what Elijah did when he poured water on the altar before calling down the fire of God to incinerate it.

Can we learn anything about healing from this story? Jesus healed the man without the man himself taking any initiative. He never asked Jesus to heal him. There was no advance conversation between the two. There is no indication the man exercised faith, although he did obey Jesus when he was instructed to wash in the pool of Siloam. It seems the only thing we can learn about healing from this story is that Jesus can truly heal the blind! That should be enough.

The Response

The people who knew this blind beggar and had seen him day in and day out are as much at a loss as he is. We could speculate forever on what they were thinking, but of one thing we’re sure: they immediately rush off to the religious authorities: “If anyone can explain what happened, the Pharisees can. They’ll know what to make of all this.”

The response of the religious elite is nothing short of stunning. They launch a full-scale investigation. After all, they can’t have some guy going around restoring sight to the blind! And on the Sabbath day at that. The Pharisees are divided. For some, healing on the Sabbath is wrong. Therefore, whoever did it can’t be from God. Others argue that if you can heal someone blind from birth you must be from God, the Sabbath notwithstanding!

One thing I’ve noticed over the years is that often the only people who seem to mind it when a miracle occurs are those to whom it doesn’t happen. The person who is healed or delivered or touched by the manifest power of God cares little for the petty theological disputes that follow.

But maybe the whole thing’s a hoax. Maybe this guy was never blind in the first place.

“I’ve been to those healing meetings before. I know how they plant perfectly healthy people in wheel-chairs and then pretend to heal them.”

Yeah, sure. And this guy willingly sat begging for food for forty years as a “plant” for some religious charlatan, all the while pretending to be blind!

Desperate for some answers, the Pharisees quiz the man’s parents (vv. 18-21). They ask three short questions:

“Is he your son?”

“Was he really blind?”

“How is it that he now sees?”

To which they respond with three quick answers:

“Yes, he’s our boy.”

“Yes, he was born blind.”

“We don’t have a clue. He’s an adult. Go ask him yourselves!”

The religious leaders and theologians of Jesus’ day weren’t much different from a lot of those today. They had their theological framework in place and nothing would be allowed to dismantle it. They revered tradition and custom and habit and interpreted anything that threatened them as most certainly not having come from God. After all, they had a doctrinal statement to maintain and personal comfort to protect and a reputation to guard and no amount of supernatural activity was enough to change their minds.

The frightening thing is how often we all use our religious commitments to justify keeping Jesus at arm's length. There is no sadder irony in the kingdom of God than the way we use our religious laws and traditions to quench the activity of the Holy Spirit.

In this case, some might think the Pharisees had a case. First of all, according to their traditions, healing was forbidden on the Sabbath day unless it was required to save a person's life. And making mud from spittle was forbidden because in order to do this one must engage in kneading. Furthermore, no one had ever healed a blind man with spit and mud! Surely God would never employ a method so offensive and messy and ugly and lacking dignity and the religious sophistication we've come to expect (if not demand). There is simply no escaping the fact that when the Spirit shows up in power, strange things can happen, things that we've never seen before.

There are many (are you among them?) who reject the miraculous because of the "weirdness" or strange way in which it is often expressed. Augustine, perhaps the most important and influential figure in the entire history of the church, was once a cessationist, who insisted that miracles of healing and prophecy had ceased with the death of the last apostle. But then he became a personal eyewitness to more than 70 healings in his community. At the end of his life he wrote his *Retractions* (also called, *Revisions*) in which he confessed that he now believed in the on-going miraculous healing power of prayer.

What makes this fascinating is that many of the healings witnessed by Augustine, and described in his monumental work, *City of God* (22.8), occurred in conjunction with the use of relics, such as what they believed were the bones of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. He tells of one woman who was delivered from demonic oppression when she anointed herself with oil that was mixed with the tears of the pastor who had prayed for her. A blind lady was completely healed when she applied flowers to her eyes that were being carried along with the bones of Stephen. Augustine tells of four instances of people raised from the dead through the prayers of people who had some degree of contact with the relics of Stephen. Weird? Strange? Yes. But as Jack Deere has said, "strangeness is not a criterion for truth. Nor is it a criterion we would want to use in order to decide whether something is scriptural or unscriptural" (*Surprised by the Power of the Spirit*, 74-75).

I think it's weird that a man should be raised from the dead after making contact with the decaying bones of Elisha (2 Kings 13:21). I find it bizarre that a man should have to wash seven times in a river to be healed of leprosy (2 Kings 5:1-14). That a multitude of demons should be cast out of a man and enter into a whole herd of pigs, who proceed to run into the sea and drown, is a bit unusual (Mark 5:1-20). That God should heal someone who came under the shadow of Peter (Acts 5:14-15) or who was touched by an apron worn by Paul (Acts 19:12) is exceedingly strange. I'm not suggesting these methods are normative for us, but for whatever reason God was pleased to make use of them to perform wonderful works of healing! That Jesus should heal a man born blind by placing a mud ball on his eyes is weird. But it happened!

The Paralyzing Power of the Fear of Man

The fear of man may well be the most paralyzing power on earth. A fear so powerful that a mother and father who've just seen their own child miraculously healed of congenital blindness freeze when confronted by the religious authorities of their day. Too terrified to acknowledge a miracle. Too terrified to give God thanks for this magnificent and long-awaited display of mercy. Too terrified to celebrate with their son. Terrified of losing face with the religious establishment. Terrified of losing status in the temple.

This is no stranger who has regained his sight. This isn't the neighbor's kid. This is the child of their own bodies. Suddenly, in one incredible moment, all their years of anguish are over, and all they care about is their status and place in the community!

The long, dark days of doubt and weeping and anger are over. The years of arguing with God and prayers that often turned to protests are over. The countless hours of speculation ("Who had sinned that our son was born this way?" "Why does God hate us so?") are over. The sleepless nights and bitterness of heart and forced explanations from well-meaning friends . . . all are over. The anxiety of wondering who would care for him after we're dead, over. The whispers and finger-pointing of neighbors and family members, over. Forty years of living hell, over in one second.

Did two people ever have greater cause for celebration? Was there ever greater justification for throwing a party? Could joy and laughter and tears of sheer delight ever be more appropriate than now? Yet, all they could think about was what others will think of them should they acknowledge that this Jesus was really the Messiah after all. They can't even think of their son, of his joy and freedom and excitement. You can almost hear them saying to themselves:

“Oh my. What will the religious leaders think if we acknowledge that Jesus healed our son on the Sabbath? What will they do to us if we confess that Jesus is the Messiah? Ah, to heck with our son. We have a position in the community we've worked hard to gain.”

If you think I'm making this up, look again at John 9:22,

“His parents said these things because they feared the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone should confess Jesus to be Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue.”

Okay, okay, I hear you. But we're not just talking about whether or not you confess Jesus to be the Messiah. We're talking about your 40-year-old son who was born blind, whose burden you have carried these many years, the son of your own bodies who now sees perfectly! Can you not even acknowledge *that*? Evidently not. Such is the power of fear.

Some Christians are so afraid of what others may think, so afraid of losing face, of losing prestige and respect, perhaps fear of losing a job or a client or a golfing partner, so afraid of being excluded from some inner circle of influence, that a supernatural miracle of unimaginable proportions could come up and bite them on the bottom and they would respond: “Ouch!” “What happened?” you ask them. “Oh, nothing. Nothing at all.”

The Interrogation Continues

Not getting the answer they wanted from his parents, the Pharisees turn once again to the man (vv. 24-34). Up to this point they had only one conclusion: the person who healed this blind man is a sinner! But they hadn't been able to budge the testimony of the man healed of blindness. They suspect that something has been kept hidden from them, so they place man under a religious oath to tell them what really happened.

“Give glory to God!” does not mean, “Praise God.” It means, “Before God as your witness, own up to the truth. Tell us what really happened!” The healed man claims no special knowledge to decide whether or not Jesus is a sinner, but one thing he knows for sure:

“I used to be blind, but now I can see! I can't answer all your questions. I don't have the solution to your problems. There are mysteries of life and death and God and man I can't begin to comprehend. I'm not up to snuff on your rules on what can and can't be done on the Sabbath. And to be perfectly honest, I couldn't care less. I don't profess to know anything about the other things this man Jesus may have done. I can only tell you what I know with absolute certainty: I was born blind. I haven't seen anything in forty years. But now I can see!”

Up until now the formerly blind man has tried to be polite, but he finally figures out that the professed impartiality of his interrogators is pure show. Since he has already answered their questions, why would they continue to ask him the same things over and over again? With more than a little sarcasm, and no doubt wearied and irritated by their tedious repetitions, he asks if their demand for answers is bound up with a secret desire to become disciples of Jesus themselves!

They are incensed! His taunting question has stripped away the mask of their hypocrisy. So he responds with yet another sarcastic comment:

“Well, isn't this fascinating? Jesus has performed this astounding miracle and you can't even decide where he comes from?”

The healed man reminds them in v. 32 that healing of the blind was quite rare in the OT (see 2 Kings 6:8-23). But healing someone blind from birth is unprecedented. He is blown away by their stubborn unbelief. “If this man Jesus

was a scandalous sinner, like you say, do you think God would grant him the power to heal the congenitally blind? Come on, guys. Get a life!”

Unable to respond to his argument, they turn to personal abuse: “You were born in utter sin!” (v. 34). This is probably a cruel reference to his having been born blind. But wait a minute! This means that they now acknowledge he had in fact been born blind and that he had in fact been healed! The truth comes out. Nevertheless, they excommunicate him. They kick him out of the synagogue.

Spiritual Blindness, Spiritual Sight (vv. 35-41)

Up until now the healed man had not even seen Jesus. So Jesus comes and finds him. He asks him: “Do you believe in the Son of Man? Do you believe in me? Will you trust me?” To which he responds: “Lord, I believe.” And he worships him. Here is a man who had been cast aside by other people but now is taken in and received by God. He lost the synagogue, but found heaven. It was for him the end of religion but the beginning of a relationship!

It is clear from what Jesus says in vv. 39-41 that the healing miracle which gave literal sight to the physical eyes of a man born blind was an *acted parable* designed to say something about spiritual blindness.

When Jesus refers to those “who do not see” (v. 39) he has in mind those who *know* they are blind and are aware of their need for the light that Jesus provides. He came to give them spiritual sight. When he refers to those “who see” he has in mind those who *think* they see spiritually and thus feel no need for Jesus and what he offers. He is speaking ironically. They *claim* they can see everything perfectly. These Pharisees who insist they aren’t blind are self-confident, self-assured, and self-righteous and thus remain forever in a condition of darkness that is far worse than that in which the formerly blind man lived for forty years.

In other words, the Pharisees and others in the crowd were too arrogant and self-satisfied to admit the severity of their own spiritual blindness. The light that Jesus brings only serves to blind them further. So their guilt remains. Thus, the point Jesus is making here is this:

“If you would simply acknowledge, admit, and confess your spiritual blindness and cry out for the healing light of the gospel, you would not be guilty of the sin of unbelief and the sin of rejecting me. But since you *think* you see spiritually and therefore are convinced you have no need of me, the guilt of your sin remains.”

Conclusion

After hearing this story, all of us have a question to ask of ourselves:

“Am I a Pharisee, a cynical skeptic who is more concerned with preserving my sacred traditions than with seeing and experiencing the miraculous power of God?” If the answer is Yes, and only you can know, I appeal to you to repent.

Or,

“Am I enslaved by the fear of man? Am I like this man’s parents, too afraid of others to acknowledge and rejoice in the power of God, too afraid of losing my reputation, too afraid of forfeiting status in the religious community?” If the answer is Yes, only you can know, I appeal to you to repent.

Or,

“Am I like this man, willing to obey Jesus, acknowledge and trust him as Lord, give thanks to him for his glorious power, and worship him as the one who has opened my eyes not only to see the physical world but to see the truth of the gospel?”