

Time for another one-on-one! This week, Jesus has an encounter with a man blind from birth and the result is pretty remarkable. Before we dive in, though, I want to talk a little bit about how fraught it can be to talk about healing stories like this in scripture. The challenge for me, for us, is to remember that a person's disabilities do not define them and that one does not become "better" once a disability is overcome.

I have been challenged and inspired by the work of disabled pastors and deacons and disability theologians who have pushed back on the notion that every aspect of their disability must be "fixed" or "removed" in order for them to be full representation of God's holy work. If you are interested in exploring this more, I highly recommend a book called "The Disabled God," which expanded my way of thinking about this topic in the best possible way.

In the case of this particular story and the particular instance of blindness, I am grateful for the words and thoughts of Duane Steele, a blind, retired ELCA pastor, who shared his reflections with the wider church in preparation for preaching this Sunday. He writes:

Unfortunately, a lot of our theology about John 9 continues to be ableist and misguided. It's time for Christians to realize that this story is not just an allegory but a real story about a real person who helped spread the Good News, and this story is not about "healing" but about vocation and mission...

...Many preachers use this man's story to talk about "darkness and light," and many Bible publishers add the heading "Spiritual Blindness" to this text, as though the blind man in this story were a symbolic object instead of a real person...

...When Jesus and his disciples first encountered the man in John 9, the disciples assumed the man's blindness was some kind of punishment for sin — and unfortunately, this attitude still exists today, even in our churches, where disability and sin are still being linked together in weird ways, like in the expression "spiritual blindness" — but Jesus clearly rejected this idea in John 9:3, saying, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him."

Some preachers interpret this to mean the man was born blind so that Jesus could come along and perform a miracle for all to see, but this interpretation robs the man of his humanity, reducing him to a mere prop in the story. Even the use of the word "healing" to describe this miracle implies that there was originally something "wrong" or "broken" about this man's blindness, which seems quite the opposite of what Jesus was saying in John 9:3. I have to admit I don't like being blind sometimes, especially when it prevents me from doing useful things like driving a car, but Jesus made it clear that blindness does not prevent us from doing God's will...

...The neighbors assumed the man in John 9 had spent his life as a beggar, merely surviving instead of living out a real vocation. Jesus changed all that by giving the man not only eyesight but also a sense of mission. After performing a fairly common ancient medical procedure with saliva and mud, Jesus directed the man to wash in the Pool of Siloam, which we are told means "Sent."...

...The man in John 9 emerged from the Pool of Siloam with a sense of mission and self-worth that shocked his neighbors. They could not believe he was the same person, so they dragged him off to be examined by the local religious authorities....

...The man in John 9 was driven out of his community as punishment for his testimony, and when Jesus heard about this, he welcomed him as one of the many disciples who were spreading the Good News. Once again, Jesus chose a person whom society had rejected. Once again, as Mary proclaimed in Luke 1:52, "[God] has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly." I believe this is what Jesus meant when he said, "I came into this world for judgement so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind."

In the Kingdom of God, we wear no labels other than our identity as the children of God. As Paul wrote in Galatians 3:28, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female" — and John 9 also reminds us there is no blind or sighted, no "disabled" or "normal" — ALL of God's children are called to live lives of discipleship in various ways...<sup>1</sup>

I am grateful for Pastor Steele's words and the insight he provides. This idea of people being used as props, not given the dignity of seeing their full humanity, is antithetical to what God does, time and time again, in scripture.

God frequently calls people who would not be the "ideal" candidates for ministry or prophecy or leadership. We even get a glimpse of that in our first reading this morning, from First Samuel. When Samuel goes to find the one who should be anointed for the Lord, his first thought is that Eliab would be the one, based on his stature and appearance. But the Lord reminds him that what matters is the heart, not someone's outward appearance.

Finally, David, the youngest, is brought forward and the Lord tells Samuel that *this* is person, *this* is the one to be anointed. I mean, Jesse must have had some pretty good jeans, because even David is described as being handsome with beautiful eyes, but it is something in David's *heart*, at the core of who he is, as a person, not a prop, that makes him God's choice. And even who he *is*, at the core, is not perfect. We know that David will make mistakes, *big ones*, and that he will struggle. But we also know that he will do things that serve the mission of God.

And what Good News that is, right?

What Good News is it that God sees who we are in our fullness, in our complete humanity, whatever that looks like, and still chooses to love us, forgive us, embrace us—and, let's not forget, empower us in mission.

The man born blind's life changes dramatically when he is able to see. It could have led him to assimilate back into the community that had kept him on the outskirts, but it didn't. No, Jesus saw him, gave him a sense of mission and purpose, and he was ready to go, to do, to follow Jesus, wherever that road may lead.

As we get closer and closer to the cross this Lent, closer to Jesus' passion and death, remember that you are seen and loved by God for who you are.

Not because of your physical abilities or in spite of any *disabilities*, but because you are a beloved child of God and God sees *who you are*. Not a prop. Not a supporting character in someone else's story. Not a front you put on for the world to see. Not the way you look or the things your body can accomplish.

*Who you are*, at the very core of your being, whole and beautiful, meant for the mission of God.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oO3V9hdFWno>