

“Encountering Jesus: Finding Identity”

The Reverend Pen Peery

Date: March 10, 2024



This is the fourth Sunday in the season of Lent. Lent, of course, helps prepare us for the celebration of Easter.

Lent is kind of like when you were a kid and your parents or grandparents told you that you had to eat your vegetables before you could have dessert. Before the lilies and the brass and the alleluias and the celebration of Easter morning, it's important for us to do some of the work to help appreciate the good news that Jesus's resurrection means.

This Lent we've dressed the vegetables up a bit. We're not heavy on the penitence – we're not loading up on guilt. Rather, this Lent we have been spending time noticing how the people who encounter Jesus in John's gospel have their lives changed.

As I've said in previous weeks – that's the hope for our discipleship: that as we follow Jesus, our lives will be different because of who and what we encounter.

Today the story is about a man who was born blind and who was healed by Jesus. But that's not all that happened. The transformation was much deeper.

Today's Scripture is a long passage – and rather than lull you to sleep with me reading all of it, I have enlisted the help of some of our youth. Let me ask Emma Monroe, Elias Humphrey, and Eliza Peery to come to the chancel to tell us this story. As they come forward, please join me in prayer:

Holy God – by your Spirit, open us to hear your word. Help us to hear it, not just as a story that was written on a page, but as a witness to what is possible by the power of your Son. And help us to trust that power as we seek to follow your Son in the everyday pathways of our lives beyond this sanctuary where you call us to go. We ask it in faith. Amen.

Hear now a word from God – this is a reading from the ninth chapter of John's gospel:

As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' Jesus answered, 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.' When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, 'Go, wash in the pool of Siloam' (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see.

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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?’ Some were saying, ‘It is he.’ Others were saying, ‘No, but it is someone like him.’ He kept saying, ‘I am the man.’ But they kept asking him, ‘Then how were your eyes opened?’ He 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.’ They said to him, ‘Where is he?’ He said, ‘I do not know.’

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They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was a Sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. Then 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.’ Some 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. So 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.’

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The 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 and asked them, ‘Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?’ His parents answered, ‘We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but 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.’ His 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. Therefore his parents said, ‘He is of age; ask him.’

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So 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.’ He answered, ‘I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.’ They said to him, ‘What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?’ He 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?’ Then they reviled him, saying, ‘You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.’ The man answered, ‘Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If

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this man were not from God, he could do nothing.’ They answered him, ‘You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?’ And they drove him out.

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Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, ‘Do you believe in the Son of Man?’ He answered, ‘And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.’ Jesus said to him, ‘You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.’ He said, ‘Lord, I believe.’ And he worshipped him. Jesus 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.’ Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, ‘Surely we are not blind, are we?’⁴¹ Jesus said to them, ‘If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, “We see”, your sin remains.

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The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of the Lord will stand forever.
This is the word of the Lord.

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Thanks to Elias, Emma, and Eliza for reading that passage.

And – I will say – that I know, even with the extra stimulation of multiple voices to break up a passage that long, sometimes it can be hard to follow everything that is going on.

So allow me to do a quick recap:

- Jesus heals a man who was born blind who the disciples assume was blind because he or his parents had done something to deserve it (which is not – and never is – how God works).
- The Pharisees (well-meaning religious rule followers) got upset because Jesus did this sign (or miracle) on the Sabbath Day.
- The Pharisees grilled the man who had been blind with questions about who Jesus was and how he took away his blindness. Then they grilled the man’s parents. And then the man, again.
- After the man who had been blind had been questioned enough times, he makes the Pharisees angry, gets kicked out of the community, then comes to the realization that Jesus is the Son of Man.

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The great irony of the story is that at the beginning, the man is blind and the Pharisees think they can see what is true. But by the end of the story, the man who used to be blind sees the truth and the Pharisees miss it.

Let me let you in on a little secret about preaching on a story that is this long and complicated: there are about a month’s worth of sermons here. Since you might not want to be here for a month, I’m going to do something a little different than a typical Sunday. I could preach a sermon that:

- Focused on miracles or signs and what those meant for the people who witnessed them.
- Did a lot of unpacking of the danger of reading this Scripture as an anti-Semitic text.
- Explored why it is we tend to think that people did something to deserve their bad breaks in life.

Instead I simply want to make two observations about this story as a whole and reflect on each of them a bit.

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The first observation I want to make about this story is that after Jesus does his – admittedly kind of strange and gross move with the spit and the mud in the blind man’s eyes – no one is excited about it.

Did you notice that?

The disciples don’t give any reaction. The neighbors who had grown accustomed to the blind beggar in their midst – like a fixture...or a feature of their daily routines – the neighbors are more confused than anything else. The Pharisees – the religious officials (God bless them) – they run right past any wonder over a miracle being performed in their midst and become outraged that said miracle didn’t happen according to their schedule (and within the boundaries of their control). The man’s parents were too worried about their own well-being to celebrate their son’s healing. Even the man himself – at least initially – doesn’t seem overwhelmed with emotion.

I mean, Jesus just gave a blind man his sight! That doesn’t happen on the regular. But there is no “wow!” There is no rejoicing. There is no “amazing!” There is just...

Flannery O’Connor once wrote that “All human nature vigorously resists grace because grace changes us and the change is painful.”¹

¹ Flannery O’Connor, *The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O’Connor*, (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1988), 213.

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And maybe that’s how we can understand the reaction to this amazing act of grace that Jesus performed: it disrupted things. The man and his neighbors around him had gotten used to the routine. He begged, he depended on the community, they did what they could when they could. The Pharisees had gotten used to the routine – things happened in the order that they should when they should.

Much of the time, God’s grace shows up like change: a personal change – when grace wakes us up to another version of ourselves; community change – when grace leads us to understand the needs of our neighbors and work together for a different outcome; systemic change – when grace pricks our collective conscience and helps us to see that some of our fundamentals are off and need to be reconsidered for the sake of the common good.

That kind of change can be difficult, even painful – as O’Connor suggests – because it makes things that we’ve gotten used to...different. It upsets the norm – even a norm we might all acknowledge isn’t ideal.

So that’s my first observation: that perhaps, rather than being surprised that God’s grace might do this, it might help us to recognize and welcome grace if we could expect that it will disrupt things.

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A second observation is that the man born blind wakes up to who Jesus is and what Jesus means gradually.

I don’t know how we got it into our heads that the Christian faith was like a light switch that we either suddenly turn on when we have a conversion moment, or that we are born with in the on position. I don’t know how we got stuck thinking that having faith in Jesus was about an idea – or about believing or knowing the right things...as if faith is an object that we can possess and control.

I think if we all took a look at our journey of faith, we might find that it is a winding road of stops and starts and seasons where our faith and connection to and awareness of Jesus felt vibrant and alive in some cases, and distant and confusing in others.

I know that is the case for me – which may sound strange for your pastor to admit. But in my own life, I’ve grown from **knowing about** Jesus through the lens of what I was taught as a child and home and at church – to **being curious** about Jesus as I grew into adulthood – to trying to understand how to **think about** Jesus through the rigor of seminary (which is graduate school for pastors) – to **searching for** Jesus through the experience of tragedies with my friends – to **locating** Jesus through my trips to the Holy Land – to **being known and loved** by Jesus in middle age as life has begun to shift from something I was trying to prove to something I am beginning

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to accept and appreciate. And at every stage in my journey there have been moments of feeling confident and fragile in my faith; moments of clarity and moment of doubt. I would invite you to reflect on your own journey – a journey that will continue past the place we consider it today.

One interesting thing about the man in this story is that he doesn't have a name. At the beginning of the story, he is not known as a person, but only by his condition...as a blind beggar. By the end of the story, he understands himself to be a disciple and a witness and someone who is claimed and loved...*personally*...by the Son of Man for whom the world waits.

He understands Jesus through the context of a relationship – and that relationship took time to build, from the beginning of the story and his experience as one whose life was disrupted by grace, to the end.

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There is, perhaps, one more reason the gospel writer John tells us this story about a person without a name learning what it is to have their life interrupted by grace and carry on a journey that ends in recognizing the joy of what it means to have a relationship with Jesus...it is so that those who read it – and even hear it these many years later – might find ourselves in the story.

So may God give us ears to hear, eyes that see, and hearts that understand.

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In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen

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