

## FOR THOSE WHO NEED IT MOST, GRACE WINS

John 9

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The entire ninth chapter of the gospel of John tells one story, the story of Jesus healing a blind man, and what happens before and after that miracle.

The story begins this way: “Walking down the street, Jesus saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked, “Rabbi, who sinned: this man or his parents, causing him to be born blind?” In Jesus’ time, people believed that illnesses and disabilities were a form of punishment. That was, of course, 2000 years ago. Sometimes I think we haven’t come very far. I can’t tell you how many times I have similar conversations with people. “Why me? Why did I get cancer? What did I do to deserve this? Why do bad things always happen to us? Are we being punished? Why can’t I ever get a break?”

Jesus answers the disciples like this: “You’re asking the wrong question. You’re looking for someone to blame. There is no such cause and effect here. Look instead for what God can do.” There is so much wisdom there. Why do we always look for a reason? For someone or some thing to blame? We wallow in our despair, asking why. Instead, Jesus says, “How is God working through this situation? Open your eyes to what God is doing in your life right now.”

This is wisdom. Things happen to us in life that we can’t predict. Beautiful things, terrible things, crazy things, challenging things. When things happen, stop briefly and say to yourself, “What do I need to learn from this experience? Is there anything I wish I would have done differently that I want to remember?” But don’t blame. Don’t beat yourself up. Don’t wallow. And certainly don’t believe that God is either rewarding OR punishing you. Instead, ask, “What can I learn from this? How is God at work in my life right now? How can I use this experience to help others in the future?”

Do you see the difference here? It's subtle but it's such an important life lesson. God doesn't CAUSE good or bad things to happen in our lives in order to teach us something. God isn't in the reward and punishment business. God is in the growth business. We can learn and grow from every experience, through every experience.

Let's open our eyes and be aware that God is running this race of life with us.

Jesus turns his attention back to the man who was born blind, touches the man's eyes, and gives him the gift of sight.

Now imagine that you are born blind, in a time when people assumed that your blindness was a result of something bad you or your parents did. You have to learn to live without one of your senses, AND you have to live being shunned by everyone around you. The word for this life experience is "stigma". The definition of stigma is: "a mark of disgrace associated with a particular circumstance, quality, or person."

When you live with stigma, you feel like you are not fully a part of the human family. Something about you subjects you to stares or cruel comments. People who are obese, people who live with mental illness that causes outward behavioral differences, people with a disability, people whose heads are shaved because of chemo, people who are unusually tall or unusually short, people in same-sex relationships, people in multiracial families — these and many many more describe living with stigma.

Jesus wanted to return the man born blind to his community, the fullness of life. He heals him, not just so that he can see, but so that he can experience abundant life, so that he can leave the margins and return to the center.

So Jesus heals the man, and it would be nice if I told you that was the end of the story. The man lives happily ever after. Let us hear what the Spirit is saying to the church. God wants us all to experience wellness and wholeness.

But there is more to the story. The Pharisees have been lurking. Once again, they're trying to get Jesus into trouble. They're trying to catch him doing something wrong, breaking one of the laws. As usual, Jesus is an easy target. There are 613 laws and Jesus is only really concerned with a few of them. He's only concerned with the ones that help to make God's love manifest in the world. When Jesus bent down to touch the blind man's eyes, he didn't care that he was healing on the Sabbath. Breaking the Sabbath commandment was far less important than restoring the blind man to fullness of life. But the Pharisees jumped all over Jesus. "Ah ha!" they said to the man who was formerly blind. "Who healed you?" The man identifies Jesus. The Pharisees start arguing among themselves. "Jesus can't be a good person, because a good law-abiding person would not heal on the Sabbath." Others said, "Jesus has to be a person of God, because only God can perform healing miracles." Back and forth they argue. The man interrupts the petty, political bickering and says, "Isn't it obvious? I once was blind, but now I see. Of course this man works for God. He is a prophet and I believe in him."

Jesus then said, "I came into the world to bring everything into the clear light of day, making all the distinctions clear, so that those who have never seen will see, and those who have made a great pretense of seeing will be exposed as blind."

"Are you calling us blind?" the Pharisees scream.

There are different ways of seeing, aren't there? There are times when we open our eyes to the truth, and there are times we close our eyes to avoid seeing it.

We all need healing for our poor vision.

We turn a blind eye to the suffering of other people.

We look at another person and see only a label, not a whole person with a story. It seems to be a lesson I need to learn again and again in my life - that what you see on the outside is not the whole truth. When I was working in youth ministry, one mother in particular was a source of constant frustration. At least a few times a year, she would call me to complain about

something. Usually she thought her son was being unfairly treated, or she didn't like the way I was running the youth group. I looked at her and I saw a person who was rigid. Like the Pharisees, she was a rule-follower. I had her all sized up. Then one year, we were in the same small group on the women's retreat. The conversation grew deep, personal. There was intimate, vulnerable sharing. I found myself hearing about her childhood, which included abuse by a close relative. I looked at her and felt that I was seeing her for the very first time. I had been blind; I had not seen her as a whole person with a story, a life I knew nothing about. I never thought of her the same way again.

I'd like to tell you that I learned my lesson, but no, I continue to size people up, judge them before I know them, arrogantly assume I have them all figured out. It's a blind spot; I need to be healed.

Jesus holds a giant torch. Not a tiny candle but a giant torch that you can't miss, and says, "I am the light of the world. Follow me." Yet how often do we shade our eyes, thinking his light is too bright, his way too difficult. How often do we blindly follow other gods, choosing to believe, for example, in the god of materialism who tells us, "Just buy one more thing and you'll find joy." "As soon as your retirement savings grows, you'll be satisfied." "When you upgrade your car, then you can give more money to mission and ministry." We need to experience healing grace.

For all the times we avert our eyes instead of looking directly at another human being, we stand in need of healing. For all of the times we ignore the beauty around us instead of fully appreciating every budding tree, every sliver of blue sky, every star-studded night, we stand in need of healing.

And can you look in the mirror and appreciate what you see there? A child of God, created in God's image? Can you see yourself through the eyes of unconditional love? Can you

see your potential? Can you see your faults, honestly acknowledging them, asking for God's help to overcome them, yet not dwell on them?

Jesus saw every person as a beloved child of God, worthy of dignity and respect, valuable, with gifts and talents to share. He didn't see the label "Pharisee", the label "beggar" or "leper" or "woman" or "child" or "Samaritan"; he saw someone in need of love. As we seek to walk in his ways, especially these last three weeks of Lent, as the cross grows closer and closer, may we see one another - and ourselves - through the eyes of Jesus?

Inside your bulletin is a slip of paper. What part of your vision needs healing? Who do you need to see more clearly? In what ways do your eyes need to be opened? Finish the prayer that is at the top of your page: "God, help me to see..." and when you are ready, place it in the basket at the foot of the cross.