



## ***‘Who Sinned?’ – Re-thinking Disability and Centering the Marginalized in Their Own Stories***

John 9:1-38 — 30 April 2017

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Listen for a reading from the Gospel of John, chapter 9:

Narrator: As Jesus walked along, he saw a man who was blind from birth. Jesus’ disciples asked,

Disciples: “Rabbi, who sinned so that he was born blind, this man or his parents?”

Jesus: “Neither he nor his parents. This happened so that God’s mighty works might be displayed in him. While it’s daytime, we must do the works of the one who sent me. Night is coming when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.”

Narrator: After he said this, he spit on the ground, made mud with the saliva, and smeared the mud on the man’s eyes.

Jesus: “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam.”

Narrator: (this word means *sent*). So the man went away and washed. When he returned, he could see.

One of the stranger conversations I’ve had in my life involved me mentioning to an acquaintance that I was autistic. I was not prepared for their response: “Oh no! What happened?”

I had no clue what answer they were expecting. *What happened? Um...I was born?*

But people have been frantically searching for the “source” of autism since the term was coined in the 1880s. One long-standing notion is that children develop autism when they have “refrigerator parents” who didn’t show them enough physical affection as an infant. Others have claimed that autism comes from pesticides, or from exposure to mercury, or, as we all know, from those dreaded vaccines.

As long as autism is depicted as a disorder that brings nothing but suffering, people are not going to accept that it “just happens” – they want something or someone to blame.

I think most of us would have to admit we’ve at one point or another looked for a “cause” when someone tells us they have a disability or a disorder, or that they’ve just been diagnosed with cancer, or diabetes.

Did your parents smoke? Do *you* smoke? What do you eat? How often do you exercise? Maybe you’re just not eating enough cheese...

[https://www.youtube.com/user/scopestories?annotation\\_id=annotation\\_2079408739&feature=iv&src\\_vid=oe24rfTZ2CQ&sub\\_confirmation=1](https://www.youtube.com/user/scopestories?annotation_id=annotation_2079408739&feature=iv&src_vid=oe24rfTZ2CQ&sub_confirmation=1)

(play from 0:18-0:36)

It's good to remember our own tendency to look for a "cause" behind disability or illness when we are looking at the ideologies offered by the Bible on this topic.

"Who sinned that this man was born blind?" the disciples ask Jesus, because the prevailing concept both of their culture and of many ancient cultures was that disability and disease are caused by sin. Many authors in the Bible voice this viewpoint, although others – such as the authors of Job and Ecclesiastes, Jeremiah and Ezekiel – challenge it; and in this passage Jesus does too: He replies that sin is *not* the cause of this man's blindness.

But just like the disciples we want a cause, we *need* a cause, so what is it? *Why* was this man blind?

Well, according to many English translations of this passage, *God* is the cause of this man's blindness: as the NRSV puts it, "He was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him."

This sounds a lot like the "everything happens for a reason" ideology that gets thrown around by well-meaning people when someone in their life encounters suffering. Any hardship this man has experienced throughout his life due to being blind had a reason behind it: to reveal God's works.

...Personally, I'm not much more a fan of this theology than I am of the "all suffering comes from sin" theology – because I've seen the fruits of this way of thinking, and most of them are not positive. We get the idea that people with disabilities are "heroic sufferers" rather than simply, you know, people living their lives; or we find people who are sick or disabled waiting hopelessly for God to swoop in and "fix" them already, isn't that supposed to happen if they're suffering for a reason?

But there are alternative ways to translate these verses, ways that do not imply God *made* this man blind *just* so that God could show off God's power by "fixing" him. I'm going to go through the Greek – bear with me, because this is interesting:

In ancient Greek, punctuation was a lot scarcer than it is in modern English – while our sentences are full of commas and colons, periods and exclamation points to give us cues about where to pause or end a sentence, the Greek manuscripts of John 9 are lacking these marks.

Usually it's not too hard to figure out where one sentence ends and another begins, but every now and then where the translator chooses to drop a period or comma has a real effect on the meaning of the passage.

In our verses here, some scholars argue that Bible versions like the NRSV, the Common English Bible, and even good old King James have mis-placed some important punctuation.

**NRSV:**

“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 he who sent me while it is day...”

**Revision:**

“Neither this man nor his parents sinned. But in order that the works of God might be revealed in him, we must work the works of the one who sent me while it is day.”]

What’s the difference? The revised translation removes the phrase that the NRSV threw in despite it not existing in the Greek – “he was born blind so...” – and also moves the period back to right after “Neither this man nor his parents sinned.” In doing so, the next sentence can now be translated “But in order that the works of God might be revealed in him, we must work the works of the one who sent me while it is day.” There is no implication that God caused the blindness, or that it was “caused” by anything at all, though God can make use of this happenstance for good. This translation gives us the chance to see blindness not as a punishment for sin, nor a test of someone’s virtue that they “just have to suffer through”, nor a thing set up by God so God can show off, but as something that *just happened*.

This is a more neutral conception of disability, one that I think would resonate with those disabled people in our own day who ascribe to **the social model** of disability. The social model of disability argues that disabilities are *disabling* more because of society’s lack of accommodations than because of any inherent brokenness.

But rather than listen to me talk about it, let’s watch a clip where various disabled people explain this way of understanding disability.

<https://www.scope.org.uk/about-us/our-brand/social-model-of-disability> (play from 0:00 – 1:32)

Those of us who follow the social model of disability stop looking for a “cure” for something we don’t see as brokenness, and focus instead on advocating for accommodations and acceptance in our societies.

But, given the current lack of accessibility in our world, it’s fair and reasonable that many other people with disabilities *do* wish they were able-bodied or neurotypical. Thus in the healing stories we find throughout the Gospels, the people whom Jesus heals usually cry out to him first, asking to be healed – because the ancient worldview held

that disability meant a lack of wholeness, and therefore this blind man did not have a full place in his society.

Before before we judge this ancient culture too harshly, we should take a look at our own –people with mobility-based disabilities are often kept out of public spaces due to a lack of ramps, or elevators, or accessible bathrooms; and Autism Speaks with its puzzle piece logo implies that there’s “something missing” in autistic people. If our own society has miles to go to become to recognize the full humanity and allow for the full participation of people with disabilities, it’s hard to expect better from a pre-scientific age before braille or wheelchairs or advanced medication.



Photo taken from <http://asacentralohio.blogspot.com/2010/04/neurodiversity-awareness-at-ohio-state.html>

So while the man in this passage does not verbally ask to be given sight, he must desire it since he obeys Jesus’ instruction to go wash. He has been told that he needs sight in order to be whole, so he’ll even let a stranger rub spit in his eyes if that’s what it takes to get it.

Off he goes to Siloam, and when he comes back he is able to see – which brings us to the next segment of our Bible passage. Listen again for a word from God.

Narrator: The man’s neighbors and those who used to see him when he was a beggar said,

Neighbor 1: “Isn’t this the man who used to sit and beg?”

Narrator: Some said,

Neighbor 2: “It is,”

Narrator: and others said,

Neighbor 1: “No, it’s someone who looks like him.”

Narrator: But the man said,

Man: “Yes, it’s me!”

Neighbor 2: “How are you now able to see?”

Man: “The man they call Jesus made mud, smeared it on my eyes, and said, ‘Go to the pool of Siloam and wash.’ So I went and washed, and then I could see.”

Neighbor 1: “Where is this man?”

Man: “I don’t know.”

Narrator: Then they led the man who had been born blind to the Pharisees. Now Jesus made the mud and smeared it on the man's eyes on a Sabbath day. So the Pharisees also asked him how he was able to see.

Man: "He put mud on my eyes, I washed, and now I see."

Narrator: Some Pharisees said,

Pharisee 1: "This man isn't from God, because he breaks the Sabbath law."

Narrator: Others said,

Pharisee 2: "How can a sinner do miraculous signs like these?"

Narrator: So they were divided. Some of the Pharisees questioned the man who had been born blind *again*:

Pharisee 1: "What do you have to say about him, since he healed your eyes?"

Man: "He's a prophet."

Narrator: The religious leaders didn't believe the man had been blind and received his sight until they called for his parents. The religious leaders asked them,

Pharisee 2: "Is this your son? Are you saying he was born blind? How can he now see?"

Parents: "We know he is our son. We know he was born blind. But we don't know how he now sees, and we don't know who healed his eyes. Ask him. He's old enough to speak for himself."

Narrator: His parents said this because they feared the religious authorities. This is because the religious authorities had already decided that whoever confessed Jesus to be the Christ would be expelled from the synagogue. That's why his parents said,

Parents: "He's old enough. Ask him."

The way this man's neighbors and the religious leaders interact with him is all too reminiscent of the experiences of people with disabilities in our own time.

I have commiserated with friends who use wheelchairs or canes about how people will talk about them while they are *right there!* – just like the neighbors ask each other "Is this guy the blind guy?" "No, I don't think so," and don't seem to think of *just asking him!*

He has to assert himself, has to interrupt them, in order to enter this conversation that's *about* him – "Yes, that's me!" he says.

And then when the religious leaders hear his story, they don't find it credible when it's from him, the one who actually experienced it. They feel the need to go to his parents for "real" proof. I can't tell you how often this happens to autistic people – for some reason it's assumed that our parents, our therapists, and doctors know more about us than we do.

This man's parents confirm what the Pharisees wanted to know – that this is indeed their son and he was indeed born blind – but then the parents move the spotlight back on him.

Their reasons for doing so may not be ideal – the narrator says it’s out of fear that they insist, “Ask him!” – but I for one would appreciate it if more able-bodied, neurotypical people would insist on this re-centering on the person with a disability who is being discussed.

The Autistic Self-Advocacy Network even has a slogan for this: “Nothing about us without us!”<sup>1</sup>

Because indeed, this man’s testimony – not his parents’ input, not the musings of his neighbors – is the most powerful testimony in this story. *His* testimony is the one that has the power to bring others to belief – including himself.

It’s in recounting what happened to him, not once or twice but three times, that this man comes to understand just what went on between him and Jesus.

As he repeats the story, he moves from saying simply that “A man named Jesus” gave him sight to recognizing this Jesus as a prophet; and his journey to spiritual insight is only halfway done!

Let’s keep listening as the man tells his story to the leaders one more time.

Narrator: They called a second time for the man who had been born blind and said to him, Pharisee 1: “Give glory to *God*. We know this man is a sinner.”

Man: “I don’t know whether he’s a sinner. Here’s what I do know: I was blind and now I see.”

Pharisee 2: “What did he do to you? How did he heal your eyes?”

Man: “I already told you, and you didn’t listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples too?”

Pharisee 1: “You are his disciple, but we are Moses’ disciples. We know that God spoke to Moses, but we don’t know where this man is from.”

Man: “This is incredible! You don’t know where he is from, yet he healed my eyes! We know that God doesn’t listen to sinners. God listens to anyone who is devout and does God’s will. No one has ever heard of a healing of the eyes of someone born blind. If this man was not from God, he couldn’t do this.”

Pharisee 2: “You were born completely in sin! How is it that you dare to teach us?”

Narrator: Then they drove him out.

Narrator: Jesus heard they had driven out the man born blind. Finding him, Jesus said,

Jesus: “Do you believe in the Son of Humanity?”

Man: “Who is he, sir? I want to believe in him.”

Jesus: “You have seen him. In fact, he is the one speaking with you.”

Man: “Lord, I believe.”

Narrator: And he worshipped Jesus.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://autisticadvocacy.org/>

So this person goes from seeing Jesus as just “a man,” to “a prophet,” to “someone from God,” and finally to “Lord” – he *worships* Jesus.

This journey to knowing Jesus is so much more than one moment of miraculous healing; the transformation Jesus brings to this man’s life is so much more than him going from blind to sighted – it was about forming a relationship with Jesus all along.

Now, this transformation has some consequences. Many disability theologians read the Gospels’ healing stories as acts of restoration: Jesus “heals” blindness or deafness or sickness so that the person who was considered un-whole can be fully integrated into the community.

But in this account, the opposite seems to happen: after this man, newly sighted, declares that Jesus clearly comes from God, he gets *driven out* from his faith community.

Which means it’s time to take a moment to address (as we so often need to in the Gospel of John) the potential for anti-Semitism in our interpretation of this passage.

The author of John is taking the events of his own day, some time around 80-110 CE, and transposing them on to Jesus’s day, some time back around 20 or 30 CE. The early community of Christ-followers were Jews, and had worshiped in the Temple while it still stood and then in the synagogues after it fell, until tensions between those Jews that followed Christ and those Jews that did not culminated in a falling-out.

Historians now think that there was a mixture of “fault” on both sides – yes, the synagogue leaders may well have kicked out these Christ-followers, but just as likely, these Christ-followers may have decided on their own terms to leave the synagogues.

Either way, the religious leaders driving this man out of the Temple while Jesus was still living is historically unlikely, and painting these leaders as Evil or (as John does in this chapter) “Spiritually Blind” puts us in grave danger of anti-Semitism.

So, keeping that in mind, let’s focus on the *narrative* and thematic import of this man’s experience of being driven out from his faith community.

This man finds himself utterly transformed – not just from blindness to sight but, more importantly, from not knowing Jesus to knowing Jesus – but he doesn’t have a community to share in this new joy.

In the midst of this sudden ostracism...Jesus comes to him. Jesus *finds* him, the text says.

What a message of hope this is for any of us who have experienced exclusion or expulsion from our faith communities! As we’ll hear more about a few weeks, Jesus is indeed the good shepherd who takes care of every sheep under his care, who does not

abandon a single one, *especially* not the ones abandoned by those who claim to follow him.

It is as one of my seminary professors taught me: any time we try to draw a line between who “belongs” in church and who doesn’t, who is part of the body of Christ and who isn’t, we can be confident that God will be on the side of those we said didn’t belong.

So...whom do *we* drive out?

Whom does the Church drive out either explicitly or by failing to set enough places at the table?

Members of the LGBT community know this pain too often, of course – so many churches will tell us that we’re not welcome unless we can “pray the gay away,” or repress these aspects of our identity.

Other churches do not so intentionally exclude, but still manage to push LGBT folks away by refusing to alter their language and behavior to fully include transgender people, or by saying that they “allow” gay people but won’t officiate a “gay” marriage.

People living other so-called “life-styles”, whether they’re getting a divorce or battling an addiction, also face expulsion or shaming that pushes them away right when they need community the most.

The disability community is another group that knows too well what it’s like to be pushed to the side so frequently at church that eventually, it seems better not to come. People look away instead of shaking your hand at the passing of the peace, or talk to you like you’re a child, or constantly hold events in which you’re not able to participate.

It turns out that the man born blind was transformed by Jesus not so that he would “fit in” to the world as it was in his day or even as it is now, but rather so that he could fit into *something new*.

How are we living into transformation, preparing ourselves to fit into that new life brought by Jesus?

Perhaps one way is to transform how we perceive disability. Equating disability with brokenness is not doing the disability community any good.

It is time to read the Gospels’ healing stories with a critical eye, pondering why Jesus *had* to “heal” people with disabilities in order for them to be reintegrated into their communities.

In an age where we lack Jesus’ power to perform miraculous healings, and where many disabled people do not *want* to be “healed” anyway, what is the good news for people with disabilities or chronic illnesses?

Maybe the good news that Jesus speaks to them, to us, is this: “You *are* whole, and you *are* beloved, just as you are. So let’s fight for accessibility and acceptance, for abundant life for you and for all, together.”

As we work towards this transformation from exclusion to inclusion, it is imperative to *center* the people that churches too often push to the margins. Centering them means listening to their stories and recognizing the gifts they have to offer; it means letting them speak for themselves rather than assuming we know what they want or need; it means placing first those who have always been last by paying attention to who is absent from the table and why.

It is time for us to rethink our conceptions of things like disability, or suffering, or community. It is time for us to come to know Jesus by getting to know the members of his flock, and by coming to realize and rejoice that we *all* are part of this one flock together – the needs of one are the needs of all.

It is my most desperate hope that one day marginalized people won’t need to be “fixed” to fit the norm before they are heard and celebrated in our communities. So let’s start listening, and let’s start reconciling, and let’s start *celebrating*, as one diverse Body beloved by the same God.

#### Resources / Further Reading:

- “Out of the Darkness: Examining the Rhetoric of Blindness in the Gospel of John” by Jennifer L. Koosed and Darla Schumm; <http://www.dsqsds.org/article/view/528/705>
- *The Disabled God* by Nancy L. Eisland
- *Criptiques*, a collection of essays by disabled authors edited by Caitlin Wood
- “Commentary on John 9” by Osvaldo Vena: [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3191](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3191)
- “A Man Born Blind” by Gregory Rawn; <https://spiritandtruthpublishing.com/blog/man-born-blind-february-11-2018/>