

First Presbyterian Church
John 9:1-41, “Lord, I Believe”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 3/26/17

Intro

Hold up a lock:

- What is this? (solicit responses)
- When I hold this up, what do you see?
- What does it mean?

We would all agree that this is a pad lock.

But what is its purpose, what is it for, why is it needed?

In order to answer these questions, we each have to rely
on a set of assumptions that we live our lives by.

We each have to think back to our own experience of such locks.

If you're an athlete, the lock reminds you of working out at the gym.

If you're a gardener, the lock reminds you of the shed
where all your tools are kept.

But what if you were just let out from prison?

Then what would the lock mean to you?

Something very different, right?

For a prisoner a lock isn't to keep others out,
but to keep you in.

Or what if your house was just burglarized? Does a lock mean safety?

Or does it mean that we live a world that is unsafe,
and untrustworthy?

And what is the cause of this world in which we need locks?

Now we're digging even deeper into the set of assumptions
we carry around with us and use to interpret the world.

Everything we encounter, from locks to people to trees
to books are understood through these assumptions.

But we use these assumptions every minute of the day

without thinking about them. And this is only practical because,
to constantly examine our assumptions and reasons
for how we interpret a pad lock would be exhausting.

We can't live like that.

But the point is that whether we think about it or not,
the things we encounter, even a lock or a book,
don't have *inherent* meanings or purposes,
we assign them based on how we *see* the world.

HOLD UP LOCK

When you look at this lock, what do *you* see?

This is essentially the question asked by the disciples
when they are walking with Jesus and they encounter a blind man.
They ask Jesus—what do you see here?

We might ask ourselves the same question about the whole passage.
What do you see in these 41 verses? What does this passage mean?
How are we to understand this?

Well, like we saw with the lock, it all depends on your perspective.
We could never exhaust all the possible ways of reading this passage,
but let's walk through the story,
imagining that we are hearing from seven different people.
Each person will provide their perspective on the many issues that
—based on how they see the world—
could take center stage in this passage.

The Issues

1) vv1-5 Is personal or parental sin the reason for physical impairment?

When the story begins, as I've already mentioned,
the disciples see this man who is apparently known
in the community to have been blind since birth.
So the disciples ask Jesus,
“Whose sin is responsible for this?”

And Jesus responds that it was neither this man nor his parents that sinned.
But his blindness is there so that the works of God
might be revealed or displayed in him.

The first perspective we hear from is a person who deals on a daily basis with a physical impairment of some kind.

This person knows that the way Jesus answers this question is hugely important.

The question, “Why do I have this physical problem?” constantly runs through their mind.

“Is it because I’ve done something to God?”

Jesus’ answer shows us that even though all sin causes suffering, not all suffering is the result of sin.

There are things in the world that are just part of the chaos that we don’t understand.

Somehow, God is able to reveal himself in the midst of those things.

2) vv6-7 Did Jesus really open the eyes of a person who was born blind?

After Jesus explains the situation to the disciples, he spits on the ground and makes some mud, and puts it on the man’s eyes.

Then he tells the guy to wash his eyes off in a pool called, “Siloam.”

Now John interrupts the story just to tell us that the word “Siloam” means sent.

After the man washes in the pool he’s able to see for the first time in his life.

This man hasn’t demonstrated any faith, he didn’t approach Jesus or anything.

It’s the pure healing power of Jesus on display.

The second perspective come from someone with a scientific background.

For this person, this is the most interesting and important section—

Was there a medicine in the mud?

Is there a scientific way we can explain it?

Did the ocular nerve actually regenerate itself?

Was the ability to see temporary, or permanent?

So the first issue was “where does impairment come from?”

the second was,

“Did Jesus really open the eyes of a person born blind?”

The third issue is found in...

3) vv8-17 What is the right relationship between God’s Law and God’s grace?

This is the part of the story that our third person, a theologian, likes.

John kind of tricks us with the way he tells the story,
because we don't know until verse 13 that
the miracle occurs on the Sabbath.

Usually the Sabbath miracles state right at the beginning,
“Now, it was the Sabbath.” But not this time.
So half way in we have to re-evaluate all the questions
that the nosey neighbors are asking.

They know right away that something has happened,
and that something that big
doesn't usually happen on the Sabbath.

The Pharisees, though, are the first ones to lay it down in verse 16,
“This man is not from God,” they say,
“for he does not keep the Sabbath.”

Other people say, “Yeah, but the guy can see, can't he?
How could a sinner do that?”
All the man who was once blind can say is, “He's a prophet.”

If Jesus is from God then why wouldn't he follow the law of God?
Many of us today would say that Jesus *does* follow the Law of God,
but he doesn't follow the harsh interpretation of the Pharisees.

But still this raises an issue for our theologian—Is there a tension between
the God we read about in the New Testament,
and the God we read about in the Old Testament?
Has God changed over time?

Is one God all about laws and rules,
and the other God all about grace and love?
Maybe *that's* what this passage is all about.

4) vv18-23 The fear of some people to speak the truth—even when they recognize it.

This issue is the main thing for our fourth person who hates the media.

After all the discussion, the Pharisees are still not convinced.

So they get the guy's parents.

This is just mushrooming into a huge event, right.

They say, "Is this your son? Was he always blind?
How could he see now?"

The parent's response is almost the model response for people
in the media spotlight who do not want to play their hand
one way or the other.

Our media hating person can almost see Mom and Dad

standing in the front yard with a lawyer behind them, nodding,
while they read from a piece of papyrus:

"We are glad that our son can see, but we have no comment at this time
as to the rumors regarding how this was accomplished.

It is our understanding that our son is of legal age
and will speak for himself. Thank you."

And John comments on this part,

saying that they knew exactly who had done this
and what the implications were.

But they kept it all close to the vest because they were afraid
to speak the truth.

They didn't want to get kicked out of the synagogue
and their whole social system that their livelihood
and welfare depended on.

So for people who don't like the way the media

get into everyone's business and the way people lie

when they get interviewed, that's what this passage is about:

Why can't we just live without fear and speak what we know to be true?

The fifth issue comes to us from someone who's a social outcast...

5) vv24-34 show that loyalty to Jesus can result in rejection by society

Since the Pharisees they don't get anywhere with the parents,
they go back to the guy and say,

"Give glory to God, we know this man is a sinner."

And the guy says, “All I know is that I used to be blind and now I see!”
And the Pharisees want to know exactly what Jesus did.
But the man knows where his loyalty should be.
He plays this one in such a way as to protect Jesus.
“I’ve already told you and you didn’t listen.”
And then he delivers the most sarcastic line in the Bible
—“**Oh...I get it...you guys must want to be his disciples, too!**”

The sarcasm is not taken well.

The Pharisees insult the guy and he takes it
without backing down at all.
He comes back with, “**Now that is remarkable.**
You don’t know where he comes from...but he opened my eyes.”

Then in verse 34 the Pharisees “throw him out.”
This is more than just saying, “Get out of here.”
This is full ex-communication from the synagogue.
This man who just received the greatest gift of his life
has now lost nearly everything else that ever mattered to him.

Is that what this passage about?
That we cannot align ourselves with Jesus
without also being in confrontation
with the powerful people and institutions of the world?

We’ve got quite a list of potential primary themes going:

- The source of physical problems
- Jesus’ ability to heal
- The whole “law versus grace” controversy
- People’s fear about speaking the truth in public
- Loyalty with Jesus can mean rejection by the world’s power structures

6) vv35-38 Jesus is near to those who have faith in him.

The sixth person is someone who has recently found faith in Jesus.

When Jesus hears that this guy has been thrown out of the synagogue,
he goes and finds him.

And this is where the man’s spiritual eyes
are about to catch up with his physical eyes.

Jesus says to him, **“Do you believe in the Son of Man.”**

The man says, **“Who is he?”** Jesus replies,
“You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you.”
The man says, **“Lord, I believe,”** and he worships Jesus.

From the perspective of people who have recently become Christians,
this is absolutely the core of the passage:
Jesus is near to those who have faith in him.
He will not leave you not matter what people do to you.

7) vv39-41 Those who claim to have spiritual sight are spiritually blind

The final perspective comes from someone
who can't stand people who always have to be right.

It is in the final verses the irony of the whole story is at it's thickest.

The man who was blind now can see not only physical,
but spiritual realities, and the Pharisees
who claim to have spiritual authority
are clearly blind to who Jesus is.

Jesus says to them. **“If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin;
but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains.”**

Perhaps the story is for those of us who claim
superior knowledge and insight.
If we want to be part of what Jesus is doing
we need to have humility and begin
with acknowledging our own blindness.

The Core of It All

We've gone through the whole story,
and we've seen the perspective of seven different hypothetical people.
And these people have given us many good insights
about what this passage could mean,
depending on your point of view.

Which of the seven perspectives do you think got it right?

What is the most fundamental purpose of John chapter 9?

What do we see here? Is there something that ties everything together?

What is the over-arching message that God's Spirit is communicating?

Jesus states it very clearly right at the beginning:

The purpose of this man's blindness was to provide opportunity
for God's work to be revealed in him.

And the revelation, not only in the healing but in every aspect of the story,
is that Jesus is the light of the world.

The Bible at its core, is not about us and our issues,
or even our insight and growth.
It's about God and God's concerns.

The point of the passage is that

all of the issues brought up by the seven people
we heard from as we went through
can only be finally understood in the light of Jesus.

Physical impairment, physical healing, the Sabbath day,

the reluctance to be honest, societal rejection,

the beauty of new faith, and the dangers of arrogance—

all of these things are darkness and confusion to us

without the light of Jesus illuminating them for us.

Jesus, who is attested to in the Scriptures from begging to end

as the culmination of God's action in the world,

must provide the foundation for the assumptions
that we carry with us.

Jesus of Nazareth, the second person of the Trinity,

the Son of Man who was *sent* by the Father,

is the light that enables the whole world to really see.

The disciples do not yet understand this,

so they don't see the blind man in the light of Jesus.

They are in the dark about where his blindness comes from.

The neighbors of the man do not yet understand this,
so they are in the dark regarding the source
or even the potential for this man's healing.

The Pharisees do not yet understand this,
so they are in the dark about Jesus
who is the Lord of the Sabbath
and embodies fulfillment of the Law.

The parents of the man do not understand this,
so they speak in guarded tones to those who inquire.
They are in the dark that they have nothing to fear
and much to gain by acknowledging Jesus.

In the end, there is one person...only one person in the story
who understands that Jesus is *the light of the world*.
This person was given sight to the eyes of his body,
and the eyes of his spirit as well. "Lord, I believe,"
he said. And he worshipped him.

Do you, now *see* what the point of the passage is?
Jesus is the grid by which *all things* should be evaluated
and interpreted.

He shines light on our world and our lives and enables us
(regardless of our physical vision) to see things as they truly are,
not as the world would have us see them.

In Lent we reaffirm that Jesus is our only light for seeing
truth in the world around us.

In Jesus we do not find one light among many lights.
He is not one guru among many gurus. Jesus is *the* light of the world.
We engage in life together as his people,
we engage in the practice of Lent to remind us
that without him we are utterly lost.

But thanks be to God: the light of the world came to us in Jesus of Nazareth,
and his light continues to shine into and through our lives.