

John 9:1-41

⁹As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. ²His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" ³Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. ⁴We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. ⁵As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." ⁶When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, ⁷saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see.

⁸The 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?" ⁹Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him." He kept saying, "I am the man." ¹⁰But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" ¹¹He 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." ¹²They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know."

¹³They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. ¹⁴Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. ¹⁵Then 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." ¹⁶Some 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. ¹⁷So 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." ¹⁸The 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 ¹⁹and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" ²⁰His parents answered, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; ²¹but 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." ²²His 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.

²³Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him." ²⁴So 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." ²⁵He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." ²⁶They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" ²⁷He 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?" ²⁸Then they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. ²⁹We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from." ³⁰The man answered, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. ³¹We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. ³²Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. ³³If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." ³⁴They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" And they drove him out.

³⁵Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" ³⁶He answered, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him." ³⁷Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." ³⁸He said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped him.

³⁹Jesus said, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind." ⁴⁰Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, "Surely we are not blind, are we?" ⁴¹Jesus 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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John 9:1-41

Healing

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Today I want to talk about healing. What can we say about it? When do we reach the limits of our understanding? How does healing get to be so political? And so theological? And yet how can it be so ultimately transformational? Healing the body can do wonders for the soul.

Let's get the political side of it out of the way first.

It comes as no shock to any of us that having more resources tends to mean better healing when it comes to experiencing the modern benefits of the medical insights and interventions we've come to count on in our own time and place.

Whether it's through the benefit of good insurance coverage or the financial means to cover out of pocket the latest technology or advances in health care, we feel safer and healthier when we can take advantage of check-ups and screenings, and get the medications we need to help us feel better. When those things aren't as available, then people wait longer and get sicker before getting the treatment they need.

It's also shown to be true that those with a better support network heal better. If you have more friends, a closer family, and a supportive work environment, recovery can be that much easier.

It may also be true that those who are prayed for or who go to God in prayer have healing benefits over those who don't have spiritual support. That kind of research is still a bit

inconclusive but I tend to think that prayer support is true support – whether a cure is possible or not.

But even when we recognize that access to health care and the support of friends and family are not dispersed equally, disease is, in and of itself, a tremendous equalizer.

Rich and poor both get cancer, and heart disease, and diabetes.

Good parents or bad – anyone could have a child born with a health condition – like blindness, spina bifida, or Down's Syndrome.

So as followers of Jesus we must reckon with the fact that EVERYONE, rich or poor, good or bad, lucky or unlucky will get their turn at being sick or injured, AND we are also called to care for people as Jesus did, which, I dare say, means that the work of healing is a part of the Christian's call to ministry. That said, Jesus was one person, the Messiah in fact, and he couldn't heal everyone either. Not that we should quit trying to make our own national system better, or do our part to contribute to healing ministries that go above and beyond the public safety net, but it may help to know that our attempts to equalize access to health care will always be either flawed or thwarted, and no matter how good or bad a job we do, people that we love will still get sick, sometimes terribly so, and then die. No political solution will take away that sadness for us or for the people that we love. And that part hurts.

Hopefully it's not a complete cop-out to blame God for creating this mess by making such vulnerable human beings in the first place, but I really don't think we as humans are getting out of this dilemma of not being able to heal everyone, every time, to everyone's satisfaction. It's just not the way the world has been shown to work. Sometimes we can, correctly even, point the

blame at unfair systems that are disproportionately hard on certain populations, but other times the only fault we find is in our own ability to stay perfectly healthy all the time.

Which brings us to some significant theological conundrums about how we understand healing as well.

Some might say that in the United States today – being “healthy” is the new religion. Just look at the multitude of books that sell for every diet out there, and how many exercise facilities have popped up around every strip mall. We talk like it’s scaring the devil away to take a pass on dessert. It’s like protection from the demons of disease to go for a morning run and stay within 3 pounds of your ideal weight. Sunday morning soccer has replaced going to church in many family schedules so that the kids get their exercise as well. “Getting healthy” does do a rather good job of standing in for “getting religion.” And yet, good health is still a gift, just as grace and forgiveness have traditionally been known as God’s gifts. There are parts of healthiness that are not a result of anything we did or didn’t do, and yet we find that strengthening those muscles and that will power can make us feel somehow exempt from the cholesterol in the tempter’s morning donut.

As new as this might feel to us – it’s not new at all. It’s really part of the old religion – the religion Jesus is also trying to counter in this passage. Who’s fault was it that this man was born blind? Going fault-finding when it comes to health-related concerns gets tricky fast. We know that stress, and diet, and exercise play their part, but they aren’t everything. My neighbor, whose young son has Type 1 diabetes, has told me how hard it is to hear “diabetes” jokes come up in kids’ movies. We may laugh when a character makes fun of eating too much sugar – but it’s not so funny when you need to learn how to measure and manage insulin to keep your son alive. We say and do these things without even thinking about them – just like the neighbors in this story.

The judgment that allows us to point fingers at another person's condition leaves us wanting a better explanation when something just as difficult happens then to us.

Those pesky neighbors not only ask what sin caused this condition, but they go to his parents to see if they had anything to do with it. Who made him this way? And who was this Jesus who thought he could meddle with God's punishment that made this man blind? We want explanations for disease. What caused the cancer? What influences led to that accident? Who traumatized this child that he couldn't see? We want reasons when sometimes there are no good reasons. When we use health and sickness as a stand-in for getting things right or wrong with God, we go down a dangerous road to thinking that God is in the reward and punishment business, and that the effects of that are going to show up in our bodies.

Now, it's no wonder we end up thinking that way. We have been taught to pray for people when they are sick, and many of us do. Sometimes we even pray, hard, for them to get better. It may happen, it may not. And yet, Jesus won't allow us to interpret even his own healing touch as an indicator of God's favor or punishment. Rather, he typically points toward faithfulness and transformation as reasons for choosing whom he heals.

He says, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned. He was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him." Now I don't think I'd feel comfortable making this assessment about someone's medical condition, but then again, I'm not Jesus. This healing was done as a counter-measure to all those things we come up with to distort our understandings about illness or disability and what it means to be healed. Being healed, as Jesus understands it, is an opportunity for complete transformation. This man was blind – but now he sees, so that those who say they see - may understand just how blind they have been. It's really rather wild, isn't it? We don't want to see our weaknesses as strengths or opportunities, and yet they often can be.

Healing. Can we really make sense of it? I'm not sure. It causes us emotional distress when we can't meet the need for it, theological confusion when we can't understand how it works, and being healed, as this story shows, can turn any one life completely upside down and inside out. To go from blindness to sight changed this man. His own parents were distancing themselves from him. The religious authorities didn't know what to do with him. But Jesus saw God working through him for possibility and hope.

This week, as the Ash Grove Women's retreat planning committee met to plan this year's theme with our speaker, she reminded us that Ernest Hemmingway observed and wrote down in one of his novels, "The world breaks everyone, and afterward, some end up being strong in the broken places." The healing stories in scripture demonstrate that observation perhaps more consistently than any other. They dispel so many of our other notions about what we think healing ought to be or what we might want it to be. We don't get a magic wand. We don't get satisfying explanations. We don't get to dodge the pain of our own imperfect lives, or avoid the grief that comes when we experience the loss that comes when the disease wins. Healing is as much art as science, and that wholeness that comes from being healed is a gift, not an expectation that can be met by modern conveniences.

One more random thought in this series of random musings that I'll leave you with today.

Though healing can be felt emotionally or experienced spiritually, do remember that Jesus often healed people's bodies. The bodies that we live in are important to God – so much so that we say we believe in a bodily resurrection. God chose to experience life in a human body through Jesus. So it only makes sense to me that our substance and matter make a difference in who we are. That's why physical healing is so personal and so profound. That's why we struggle so much to explain and understand. But what I hope we draw from this passage is gratitude more than

explanation or understanding. Be grateful for your body, and for the times you have been healed – whether it was the setting of a broken arm or the removal of a tumor that was threatening your well-being. Be thankful for open eyes and listening ears. Be in prayer for those who are suffering, because the prayer lifts our concerns to the God who cares deeply for us in BODY, mind, and spirit. Amen.