**March 19, 2023 John 9 1-41**

***Inclusivity***

**Scripture:** *John 9:1-41 NRSV*

*(1)As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. (2)His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (3)Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. (4)We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. (5)As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." (6)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, (7)saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. (8)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?" (9)Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him." He kept saying, "I am the man." (10)But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" (11)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." (12)They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know." (13)They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. (14)Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. (15)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." (16)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.*

**Notes:**

1. This story exposes a ***failure*** in the community.
   1. ***Ableism*** is the discrimination of and social prejudice against people with disabilities,
   2. Ableism classifies groups of people as “***less*** ***than***.”
2. **S*omeone***had to have sinned to cause the blindness,
   1. Who ***sinned***, this man or his parents…?
   2. Jesus is shifting the man from ***unclean*** to ***clean***.
   3. What is the ***work*** of God that Jesus is talking about?
   4. ***Welcoming*** all, and ***abolishing*** all oppression.
3. Some see Jesus’s actions as ***sin***.
   1. To create the ***mud***, is forbidden on the Sabbath.
   2. Jesus illustrates a sad ***reality*** about the religious elite.
   3. The ***Pharisees*** are not interested in restoring the man
   4. They are ***focused*** on the way that Jesus has sinned.
4. The real sin in this story is the willful ***spiritual*** ***blindness***.
   1. Willful actions (***sins***) cause terrible consequences.
   2. Jesus is ***extending*** the boundaries of God’s kingdom.
5. ***Include*** people who haven’t been included.
   1. See those with disabilities through eyes of ***love***.
   2. We as people of God are expected to be ***inclusive***.
6. It is safe to say we have some ***repenting*** to do!
   1. Repentance requires ***actionable*** **change**.
   2. Commit to the work of being a people who ***confront*** injustice and oppression.

**Script:**

How do you treat those with disabilities? I know this seems like an odd and maybe even intrusive question. But when you think about it, we treat people according to the ideas we were brought up with. When I was young, I would see people who were disabled and wondered what happened to get them in the shape that they were in. I remember a man who walked around on a set of crutches, another man in a wheelchair. Later on I became acquainted with friends who were disabled due to diseases like Multiple Sclerosis, Polio, Cystic Fibrosis, and so on. I had a difficult time getting past their disabilities to see them as they truly should be seen.

Many of us look at others and wonder why they are in the shape they are in. We look at them and in the spur of the moment make determination as to what caused their condition. But do we truly see them for who they are and the gifts that God has created them with. Do we treat them differently because of their condition?

In our passage today we will be looking at a story that addresses this issue. We will look at how they were treated by the people of that day, and how Jesus saw them and treated them differently. Turn in your bibles to John 9:1-41.

*John 9:1-41 NRSV (1)As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. (2)His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (3)Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. (4)We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. (5)As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." (6)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, (7)saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. (8)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?" (9)Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him." He kept saying, "I am the man." (10)But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" (11)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." (12)They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know." (13)They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. (14)Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. (15)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." (16)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. (17)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." (18)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 (19)and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" (20)His parents answered, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; (21)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." (22)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. (23)Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him." (24)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." (25)He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." (26)They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" (27)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?" (28)Then they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. (29)We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from." (30)The man answered, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. (31)We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. (32)Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. (33)If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." (34)They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" And they drove him out. (35)Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" (36)He answered, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him." (37)Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." (38)He said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped him. (39)Jesus 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." (40)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.*

In this text, our main character is a man who has been blind from birth. And because of his blindness he has been forced into a life as a beggar. This is an indication of how his community treats people with disabilities. As an adult, begging is his only option for income in his patriarchal, able-centric world. His community members also assume that sin is the reason for his disability, which gives them an excuse to consider him unclean and ostracize him from society, leaving him to fend for himself, refusing engagement with him for fear that his sin or the sin of his family will somehow rub off on them, making them unclean. Even after Jesus confronts these injustices, and even after he heals the man, the religious leaders refuse to believe. It is easy to read this text as a feel-good story about a man whose life Jesus changes for the better, but we need to confront the more sinister things, the things that are happening in this story because they are not very different from our reality today. This story exposes a failure in this community. A failure to listen, a failure to care, a failure to include and love, and a complete unwillingness to acknowledge their own sin.

Have you ever heard of Ableism? Ableism is the discrimination of and social prejudice against people with disabilities, based on the belief that typical abilities are superior. At its heart, ableism is rooted in the assumption that disabled people require ‘fixing’ and defines people by their disability. Like racism and sexism, [ableism classifies entire groups of people as ‘less than,’](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_b7k6pEnyQ4) and includes harmful stereotypes, misconceptions, and generalizations.

This story exposes the people’s cultural assumption that disability is a consequence of sin. This assumption automatically ostracizes anyone who has a disability because they are viewed as unclean, which prohibits them from participation in temple worship as well as regular society because of the Torah-driven belief in the contagion of uncleanliness. The man in this story is on the edge of town begging, which shows his physical demotion to the outskirts of the community. Unless someone chooses to provide for someone with a disability which means causing themselves to be ostracized and viewed as unclean as well, those with disabilities are left to fend for themselves, which is why this man is a beggar. Since this man was born blind, the cultural assumption is that *someone* had to have sinned at some point to cause the blindness, and Jesus’s disciples want to know who sinned: “this man or his parents?”

Jesus’s answer that nobody sinned is therefore radical because he is rejecting the prevailing theology of the day, which is that all evil/bad luck/bad things happening to people is a result of sin. With his proclamation that nobody sinned, Jesus is publicly shifting the man and his family from the designation of unclean to a status of clean—which indicts the community’s treatment of this family. The man and his parents, if they have cared for him, should never have been excluded from the community or the temple.

Jesus goes on to offer a strange-sounding explanation: “this has happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.” What is the work of God that Jesus is talking about? Of course, it is the work of God that gives Jesus the power to make this man see. But the continuing discourse is less about physical vision and more about the willful blindness and callousness of the religious leaders regarding their exclusionary choices. In Luke 4:18–19, Jesus declares that the work of God that he has come to do involves preaching good news to the poor, proclaiming liberty to the captives, granting recovery of sight to the blind, setting the oppressed free, and announcing the year of the Lord’s favor. So the work of God involves welcoming all, and abolishing all oppression.

Some in the crowd see Jesus’s actions as sin. The word describing what Jesus does to create the mud with the saliva is an action and labor-related word, indicating that he was making or producing something. In other words, technically speaking; this act is forbidden on the Sabbath by Jewish law. Whenever Jesus heals publicly on the Sabbath, he seems to be doing it for a purpose: once again breaking the boundaries to illustrate the sad reality about the religious elite who are caring more about their legalism than they do about people’s humanity’.

The people bring the healed man to the Pharisees so they can officially pronounce him clean and able to be part of worship and community again. But the Pharisees are not interested in restoring the man to society; now they are focused on the way that Jesus has sinned.

The Pharisees have a lot of power, so when they send for the man’s parents to testify about what is going on, they are afraid because they don’t want to be excluded from worship. We can surmise they probably have been excluded in the past because of their son’s condition, were perhaps welcomed back once their son came of age when he left their home to fend for himself, and now his parents are afraid of being cast out again. So, they refuse to speculate on how or why their son suddenly has his sight, claiming he is old enough to speak for himself.

The man makes clear that he is ill equipped to make a judgment about whether someone else is a sinner. He tells them the simple truth of what he knows, which is he was blind and now he’s not. The Pharisees are not interested in the truth, however. They are interested in having their “gotcha” moment with Jesus. When the man does not give them what they want, they throw him out.

Jesus is communicating that the real sin in this story is the willful spiritual blindness of the religious leaders. Jesus says they are guilty of sin because they can’t admit their own sin. It would be easy to turn this story into an ableist illustration, but Jesus is attempting to do the opposite: he’s trying to separate blindness from sin, emphasizing that our willful actions (sins) cause terrible consequences for others. Actions like oppression, legalism, and the lack of love.

Jesus is once again extending the boundaries of the kingdom of God. He is extending the boundaries to include people who haven’t been included up to this point; like people with disabilities. Although Jesus restored this man’s sight with the partial goal of restoring his standing in the community, this text is a call for the church today to see those around us with disabilities with eyes of love, not judgment. Those with disabilities shouldn’t be left to beg on the margins of society. Those who are different shouldn’t be left to feel like an outcast on the margins of society. Those that are a bit odd shouldn’t be left on the outside looking in.

The global church has not been and still is not always good at welcoming those with disability into the worshiping community. Families and individuals facing these realities will not attend churches with accessibility issues, they will not attend churches where they feel unsupported or unwelcome, they will not attend churches where they feel unsafe. There are numerous stories from disabled people who have had random people in churches pray “healing” over them but get this, they do this, without being asked. How is this different? How is it different from the assumption that the blind man is living with the consequence of his sin? Now your first response to this comment may be to defend your action. I know it was mine, but then I realized I defend my actions when the comment identifies what I might do. Your defense many times defines your guilt. But for those of you who may have nodded in agreement with this comment; you may be beginning to see the kingdom of God through the lens of Jesus. Seeing others not for how they suffer or the cause of said suffering, but for the person God has created in them.

If the kingdom of God is inclusive; inclusive to those who have been oppressed, alienated, marginalized, and ostracized, then we as the people of God are also expected to be inclusive. In what ways do able-bodied Christians need to repent of injustice toward people with disabilities, and how can we demonstrate our true repentance by changing our ways and fighting for justice and inclusion?

People born with disabilities are not some kind of glitch in the system of God’s good creation. If the kingdom of God is inclusive of those who have been oppressed, alienated, marginalized, and ostracized, then the kingdom isn’t complete without disabled people.

We are reminded once again that loving God and loving others are the two most important callings of any Christian life. We are to be people who are motivated by love over law, just as Jesus was. We are to be people who include, instead of exclude. We are to be people who recognize that we don’t become unclean by association but that we can create a better world when we draw close to those whom the world deems unclean or unworthy.

We are deep in the season of Lent, a season of reflection and repentance. It is safe to say we have some repenting to do! Some of us have to repent of our assumptions of sin in the lives of disabled people even if we’ve never said it out loud. Some of us have to repent of our behaviors of ostracizing and excluding. Others of us have to repent of our fixation on rules. Rules that we need to adhere to, rules being broken to the extent that we forget, to look at the *people* we are breaking in the process. Still others need to repent of our oversight, our neglect of the responsibility to look around and see who hasn’t been invited or who is unable to even get into the room. We also must remember that repentance requires actionable change. Repentance means we know we have done wrong, and we seek to do better.

In our cries for repentance to a God who is inclusive, who confronts injustice and oppression in all of its forms, we must also commit to the work. We must commit to being a people who confront injustice and oppression, who seek to include, who seek to see the kingdom of God brought on earth as it is in heaven.