

Jesus, illuminator of the heart

#2 in Seven Faces of Jesus John 7-9

Reading of the text of John 9

¹⁻² *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?"* ³⁻⁵ *Jesus said, "You're asking the wrong question. You're looking for someone to blame. There is no such cause-effect here. Look instead for what God can do.*

We need to be energetically at work for the One who sent me here, working while the sun shines. When night falls, the workday is over. For as long as I am in the world, there is plenty of light. I am the world's Light."

⁶⁻⁷ *He said this and then spit in the dust, made a clay paste with the saliva, rubbed the paste on the blind man's eyes, and said, "Go, wash at the Pool of Siloam" (Siloam means "Sent"). The man went and washed—and saw.*

⁸ *Soon the town was buzzing. His relatives and those who year after year had seen him as a blind man begging were saying, "Why, isn't this the man we knew, who sat here and begged?"*

⁹ *Others said, "It's him all right!"*

But others objected, "It's not the same man at all. It just looks like him."

He said, "It's me, the very one."

¹⁰ *They said, "How did your eyes get opened?"*

¹¹ *"A man named Jesus made a paste and rubbed it on my eyes and told me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' I did what he said. When I washed, I saw."*

¹² *"So where is he?"*

"I don't know."

¹³⁻¹⁵ *They marched the man to the Pharisees. This day when Jesus made the paste and healed his blindness was the Sabbath. The Pharisees grilled him again on how he had come to see. He said, "He put a clay paste on my eyes, and I washed, and now I see."*

¹⁶ *Some of the Pharisees said, "Obviously, this man can't be from God. He doesn't keep the Sabbath."*

Others countered, "How can a bad man do miraculous, God-revealing things like this?" There was a split in their ranks.

¹⁷ *They came back at the blind man, "You're the expert. He opened your eyes. What do you say about him?"*

He said, "He is a prophet."

¹⁸⁻¹⁹*The Jews didn't believe it, didn't believe the man was blind to begin with. So they called the parents of the man now bright-eyed with sight. They asked them, "Is this your son, the one you say was born blind? So how is it that he now sees?"*

²⁰⁻²³*His parents said, "We know he is our son, and we know he was born blind. But we don't know how he came to see—haven't a clue about who opened his eyes. Why don't you ask him?*

He's a grown man and can speak for himself." (His parents were talking like this because they were intimidated by the Jewish leaders, who had already decided that anyone who took a stand that this was the Messiah would be kicked out of the meeting place. That's why his parents said, "Ask him. He's a grown man.")

²⁴*They called the man back a second time—the man who had been blind— and told him, "Give credit to God. We know this man is an impostor."*

²⁵*He replied, "I know nothing about that one way or the other. But I know one thing for sure: I was blind . . . I now see."*

²⁶*They said, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?"*

²⁷*"I've told you over and over and you haven't listened. Why do you want to hear it again? Are you so eager to become his disciples?"*

²⁸⁻²⁹*With that they jumped all over him. "You might be a disciple of that man, but we're disciples of Moses. We know for sure that God spoke to Moses, but we have no idea where this man even comes from."*

³⁰⁻³³*The man replied, "This is amazing! You claim to know nothing about him, but the fact is, he opened my eyes! It's well known that God isn't at the beck and call of sinners, but listens carefully to anyone who lives in reverence and does his will.*

That someone opened the eyes of a man born blind has never been heard of—ever. If this man didn't come from God, he wouldn't be able to do anything."

³⁴*They said, "You're nothing but dirt! How dare you take that tone with us!" Then they threw him out in the street.*

³⁵*Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, and went and found him. He asked him, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?"*

³⁶*The man said, "Point him out to me, sir, so that I can believe in him."*

³⁷*Jesus said, "You're looking right at him. Don't you recognize my voice?"*

³⁸*"Master, I believe," the man said, and worshiped him.*

³⁹*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 pretence of seeing will be exposed as blind."*

⁴⁰Some Pharisees overheard him and said, "Does that mean you're calling us blind?"

⁴¹Jesus said, "If you were really blind, you would be blameless, but since you claim to see everything so well, you're accountable for every fault and failure."

Sermon

There are so many bible stories I would like to have been an eye-witness to, and this one is on the top of my list. So much is going on with so many different layers. I would have been watching everything and commenting

- "Whoa! What a question! What an answer!
- Hey! Is anybody going to talk to the blind man as if he is a real person?
- Jesus—good on you!
- Wow those Pharisees are cold-hearted buggers!

As with most episodes in John's gospel, there is more than one thing happening. There is the actual event -- the healing of a blind man; and there is a truth taught in the form of a metaphor. Here the metaphor is blindness—spiritual blindness. Spiritual blindness is resisting, blocking, thwarting the revelation of God in Jesus.

As we go through this *I-am* episode, I want to pay attention to the contrast between progressive spiritual sight and snowballing spiritually blindness. To say it another way— I want you to pay attention to the contrast between increasing illumination of the heart and crippling hard heartedness.

Prior to this episode recorded in John 9 Jesus is on the Mt of Olives. A woman caught in adultery is brought to him by the Pharisees who say—*the Law of Moses commands us to stone this woman, what do you say?* Jesus invites whoever is without sin in to throw the first stone? The Pharisees begin to leave beginning with the oldest [interesting note]. Jesus lifts the woman up and face to face says,

"Woman, where are they? Does no one condemn you?" "No one, Master?" [Catch the irony—not even you—the sinless one] "Neither do I," said Jesus. "Go on your way. From now on, don't sin."

Right on the heels of this Jesus says to the crowd,

“I am the light of the world [apparently with regard to God, the law of Moses, judgment and forgiveness]. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.

The woman, the Pharisees, the crowd all saw the *same* light yet some hearts were illumined and some hearts were darkened.

What allows the light in and what shuts it out? That’s where I am headed today. Jesus is not only the light of the world—bringing the revelation of God, salvation, and hope to the whole world on a cosmic scale. He is also the light of your world--the illuminator of your soul. The Christian life is a pilgrimage at its best when we repeatedly allow Jesus to illumine our hearts. Jesus is not a one-time lighting storm light of the world. He is the light of the world in an ongoing way on more than one level. So pay attention to everything you see that contributes to light being let in and light being shut out for every character in this story— but particularly the blind man and the Pharisees and what that may mean for your receptivity to the light.

Back to the story—come down from the Mount of Olives and into the crowded streets of Jerusalem. John 9 opens with Jesus is walking down a crowd Jerusalem street during the Feast of the Tabernacles.

The Feast of Tabernacles was one of three mandated Hebrew festivals where as many as were able made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem in late October to live for a week in temporary shelters commemorating the Exodus pilgrimage. The Festival corresponded with harvest so there was lots of food, celebrations and thank-offerings for everything from salvation from slavery to this year’s harvest. Light played a central part in this festival, a candelabra being lit in the temple to symbolize the pillar of fire which God had used to lead the Israelites in the wilderness (Exodus 13:20-22).

The streets are packed tighter than prunes in a bulk food bin as Jesus slowly moves about with his disciples through more smells, sounds and sights than one could take in. I’m surprised that the disciples even noticed the blind man—and I’m also shocked that when

they did notice him they talked about him as if he is not there, "*Rabbi, who sinned: this man or his parents, causing him to be born blind?*"

Imagine doing that with one another after worship today—gathering in little groups—look at that hair—who sinned that person or their family of origin? Look at that body mass index—who sinned? The only way I can be generous with the disciples is thinking that they are still on the Mt of Olives; still pondering Jesus' words and actions with the woman caught in adultery; still trying to put together in their heads how Jesus is changing the play book on sin and judgement.

I imagine that the blind man got this kind of arms length analysis of his disability--this absence of personal interaction and this kind of dismissive judgement all the time. It still happens today. You see it and I see it. In these opening verses of John 9 however innocent this question, the spiritual blindness here belongs to the disciples—their spiritual disability matches and exceeds the blind man's physical disability.

Jesus says what he is about to say to the disciples, but certainly loud enough for the blind man to hear. Jesus response here says so much in so few words. If all we had of the bible was a fragment with these words—you could live a God honouring life for years.

Who sinned, this man or his parents causing him to be born blind? [Jesus responds] You're asking the wrong question. You're looking for someone to blame. There is no such cause-effect here. Look instead for what God can do

Four bits of light to illumine your mind, your heart, your relationships, your behaviour in general

1. You are asking the wrong question
2. You are looking for someone to blame
3. There is no cause-effect here
4. Look instead for what God can do

The four things I've just mentioned are Eugene Peterson's paraphrase to capture the spirit of the original text—and it is a very good one I might add. The NIV text: Jesus responds to the question who sinned simply as

Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him

In truth, there are no wrong questions to ask God— but you can ask a question with an open heart or a hard heart and that determines your receptivity to the answer. I think the disciples ask this question with open hearts. We will see the opposite later as this episode unfolds.

If you are starting a list—there are three things which contribute to spiritual blindness—

- asking the wrong questions or asking with a hardening heart;
- hyper focus on blame;
- Demanding a cause-effect explanation or an answer to the question “why?”

Live by that trinity and you will become blind to what God is doing and much of what He has for you.

Imagine applying that trinity to parenting—asking the wrong questions of your child; always looking for a way to blame them; haranguing them with why did you do that? Imagine applying that trinity to relationships; to partners; to business? The same is true for having a relationship with God—live this trinity with God and not much life to be found.

Now imagine living in all those relationships by looking for what God is doing and can do? What a difference! Look for what God is doing in the mess—and what God can do. That is why I am committed to look for redemptive story in the messiness of our stories. God loves to work in messy situations. Regardless of the circumstance there is always an invitation attend to God's light. Not everything gets fixed, but there are always redemptive bits. Looking for those and you will find your heart receiving more light.

Before I move things along a little faster, let's pause on Jesus answer—**no one sinned; neither this man, nor his parents sinned in a way that resulted in this disability.** Jesus brings the light of God to several misunderstandings about sin. Interestingly I still see many Hollywood flicks with this dialogue in it:

- *God must be punishing me because my daughter died;*
- *God must be punishing me because I have cancer*
- *God must be punishing me because this deal fell through*

Such notions are darkness, not light. Such notions harden the heart. Jesus would not allow them. Jesus makes it clear that sin has nothing to do with physical disabilities, personal suffering or illness; or in this passage violating the ceremonial Sabbath laws. It is not said upfront here, but clearly implied that *there is a new definition of sin in town—* and it is resisting the light. What is the light given the man is blind?—let's see what God can do—let's look for the redemptive bits.

Jesus heals the blind man. This is the actual event upon which the spiritual metaphor will be built. In this healing Jesus uses spit and dirt and the power given him by his Father. I imagine one huge volume of Jesus' spittle on the ground, kneading the spittle and dirt together and apply it to the blind man's eyes.

There is another spiritual metaphor here—while Jesus is healing the blind man he is metaphorically throwing mud in the eyes of the Pharisees. Kneading was one of the 39 forbidden tasks on the Sabbath [see O'Day, *John*, NIB, p. 654]. This along with other multiple Sabbath violations led the Pharisees to conclude that Jesus was a sinner, a false Christ, a false prophet and should be put to death. In the theological inquisition the Pharisees conduct with the blind man later in this episode we see the most brilliant, light filled response one can make to someone who says—Jesus—how can you follow him? Who is he? the blind man counters dark conclusions of the Pharisees with his personal experience in verse 25, "I don't know if he is a sinner. One thing I know: though I was blind, now I see" (v. 25).

Now it is time for a picture to move things along:

The Blind Man Gains Spiritual Sight		
vv. 1-12	The blind man did what Jesus asked (vv. 6-7; 10-11)	The blind man gains more spiritual sight
vv. 13-17	“He is a prophet” (v. 17)	
vv. 24-34	I don’t know that—but I do know this (v. 25)	
	If Jesus is not from God . . . (vv. 30-33)	
vv. 35-41	Lord, I believe (faith + worship) (v. 38)	

Look at the progressive spiritual sight bestowed upon the blind man. This is what we call in exegeting the text a climax –great–greater–greatest--the blind man goes from physical healing—which is great to partial recognition of who Jesus is—which is greater—to a confession of faith and worship of Jesus as the Messiah –which is the greatest.

- Vv. 6-7 in vv. 1-12 Jesus anoints or christens the blind man with dirt and spittle and bids him *“Go wash in the Pool of Siloam” [washing a symbol of purification; Siloam which means sent a play on words—go to the sent pool for cleansing. Jesus is the sent one of God]. So the man went and washed, and came home seeing.*
- Vv. 13-17—brought before the Pharisees to verify the miracle—blind man who can see, but has not yet seen Jesus *confesses when asked “What have you to say about him? It was your eyes he opened.” The man replied, “He is a prophet.”*
- Vv. 24-34—brought a second time to the Pharisees—o.k. *we’ve checked out your story you were born blind, but now tell us what we want to hear about this Jesus—watch a scene to have watched; the man who now sees—grows stronger the more he is pushed.*

“Pharisees: tell the truth,. “We know this man is a sinner.”

Man who now sees: I can’t make that call-- One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!”

Pharisees: “well, how did he open your eyes?”

Man who now sees: I’ll tell you again but you don’t listen—what’s up? Do you want to become his disciples too?”

Pharisees: You want to follow him; we don’t. you not part of us; you know nothing. We know Moses. You think you can tell us where this sinner is from?

Man who now sees –you are some piece of work. He opened my eyes and you can’t figure out if God is with him. I may not know much. But I know that God does not listen to sinners. He obviously listened to this man or I couldn’t see.”

- Vv. 35-41 Jesus finds the man who has been insulted and cast off and asks the right question-- Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, and went and found him.

He asked him, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?"

³⁶*The man said, I've never seen him--Point him out so that I can believe in him."*

³⁷*Jesus said, "You're looking right at him. Don't you recognize my voice?"*

³⁸*"Master, I believe," the man said, and worshiped him.*

The Pharisees Become More Blind		
vv. 13-17	Division: sinner or from God? (v. 16)	The Pharisees become more blind
vv. 18-23	Doubt & denial of the miracle (v. 18) Fear tactics (v. 22)	
vv. 24-34	United in Disbelief (v. 24) Rejections of the blind man (v. 34)	
vv. 35-41	Blind and guilty (vv. 39-41)	

While all this goes on the Pharisee hearts become harder, their blindness increases by their own well defended walls. They are so locked into their own worldview and lifestyle box they won't allow any light in.

- Verse 16—sabbath breaker are sinners—can't be from God
- Verse 18—you weren't healed, no way
- Verse 22—let's intimidate the parents—get them to deny their kid and this will all be over
- Verse 24—that didn't work—let's intimidate the man—get him to deny his experience and agree with us
- Verse 34—that didn't work—let's humiliate and reject the man and throw him out of church at least that way we will protect us-- *"You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!" And they threw him out.*
- And the finality of darkness settling upon them—blindness
 - All right you Sabbath breaking sinner—do you think we are blind?
 - Jesus: Yes because you claim so arrogantly and forcibly to see; but you never look for what God can do, only what you think he is not doing.

So how do we apply this? Jesus is the light of the world. Just as he gave the formerly blind man increasing sight, Jesus wants to illuminate your soul—not just so you can get in on this thing we call salvation, but also to illuminate your soul on the journey.

Here is a bit of my journey over the last 7 years.

Sometime in the spring of 2004 I began meeting with a spiritual director. Nancy had tried for some time to get me to try it out. I was too proud; too independent; too private to share my many things in spiritual life and my spiritual failings with nearly anyone—not Nancy; not Paddy.

I understood that the practice of being directed was different from counselling—which is more akin to problem management; and different coaching; which is about being all you can be. I understood that spiritual direction is about experiencing God in all of life—in the dark spots, the confusing spots and the delightful spots. The director really has no agenda other than to gently take you to Jesus and leave you there to see what God will do.

I've come to see that one of the most beneficial aspects to telling our faith and life story to a person who is tuned into God and listens empathically without agenda is what happens in me—in short this is the primary context in which Jesus illumines my soul.

Much of my Christian life has been lived in my head. There is much good here. I believe in being informed and thoughtful in my Christian life about the Bible; history, belief and practice. But I've come to see that living in your faith in your mind is insufficient. It is too easy to disconnect how you think about life and how you live life. The reason I got married was to be in a relationship. The reason I had family was to be in a small community of relationship. The reason I am in this community of faith is because of relationships. And the reason I became a Christian so many years though I didn't realize it at the time—was to be in relationship with God.

I really became a Christian in the dark—I had an agenda with God. I didn't know God at all—who He is and how he acts—I was attracted to the people who said similar to the

blind man—I don't have all the answers about life—but I do have a relationship with God—in Jesus. So I joined in—and to have some sense of intellectual integrity I read voraciously to understand what I could about God and Jesus. So after a number of years I could teach more than testify. The most embarrassing question for me what—*So, what's God been doing in your life recently?*

Nancy had for some years followed spiritual disciplines to be present to God and I began to sense that while I had lots of knowledge—she had more light.

So, at my first appointment with a mentor/spiritual director over 7 years ago, when asked what I wanted from the experience, I said I want to learn to see what God is doing rather than beg for Him to do something while the eyes of my spirit are closed up tight. My first assignment was to take the passage of the blind beggar in Luke 18 and to read it not in a studied fashion but in a way to allow the Spirit to illumine me. I found that I couldn't get out of an academic, inductive, exegetical, contextual, hermeneutical, eschatological reading of the text. In short I was myopic—I had partial blindness to what God could do.

I found that I could not identify with the blind man who seized the moment of Jesus passing by to call out over the crowd, over the rebukes to get Jesus attention. I could not identify with the desperation of the blind man to see. My desire to see God at work much more subdued than that.

My director noticed that I was working much too hard both in mind and spirit. He asked,

- What would it be like for you to come to a place where you let God take the initiative with you?
- In essence He was inviting me to leave the blind man at Jericho who seizes the day aside and become the blind man of John 9 who was along the path that Jesus traveled.

It took about a year of monthly meetings before I would go with the blind man of John 9 and wash in the pool of Siloam. I go to the pool more quickly these days. And more often than not find Jesus illuminating my heart.

God is not interested in cookie cutter relationships. You notice as you read John 9 that though the big truth is the spiritual metaphor, Jesus dealt personally and uniquely with all the characters in this episode. The point of this series is not to “give you techniques” to meet Jesus, but to affirm that Jesus is not only the light of the world. He is and longs to illuminate your of your soul. If that appeals to you, there are many places to begin—I invite you to pick any of the blind Jesus encounters. John 9; matt 20; Luke 18; and see what Jesus does with you and where he takes you.