



To See or Not to See

TEXT
John 9

December 31, 2017 — Sermon by Rev. Zach Walker

When I was in high school, my friend Leatha was going over to Amber's house. When cell phones didn't exist that meant you called the person's house to tell them you were coming over, and the person at the house stayed put until you arrived. So when Leatha got there and rang the doorbell, and no one came to the door, she didn't really know what to do.

She had just called and Amber said she would be there. Should she wait, or should she go back home and try calling again?

While she was figuring out what to do, she noticed the door-knob was moving, as though someone was on the other side and having a hard time working it.

She calls out Amber's name and Amber yells back, "Hang on just a minute, I've almost got it!"

The door slowly opens, and Leatha sees Amber standing on the other side — with brownie mix all over her hands. Thus the slow response: Amber had opened the front door using her elbows.

Leatha asked Amber, "Why do you have batter all over your hands?"

Amber replied, simply, "I wanted to make brownies, and the instructions said to mix the ingredients by hand."

Leatha explained to her what that meant and Amber exclaimed, "Ooooh! That makes WAY more sense!"

Sometimes even when we see things, we don't really *see* things.

Today we find a chapter in John about seeing and not seeing. Jesus and the disciples encounter a blind man — a man who, John makes it clear, has been blind from birth. This factoid — blind from birth — would have triggered for many people at the time exactly the question the disciples asked: "Who sinned, this man or his parents?" That question in those days was something theologians struggled with and argued about. There were, in fact, theories that a person born blind could sin in utero and suffer punishment as a result. A parallel theory was that the sins of one's parents would visit upon their children — and to be honest, there is truth in that — truth in some of my decisions affecting my son. And that's not just true of parents and children; community decisions today can result in problems for the generations of tomorrow, can they not?

In either case, the disciples' question — who sinned to cause this — is basically a question about how they see and interpret the world. How do they see suffering, where it comes from and who is at fault? Is this man to blame, or is he suffering because of someone else?

I can't blame the disciples for thinking Jesus might shed some light on a difficult theological question about a difficult living reality. If given the opportunity to sit with Jesus, there are a lot of questions I'd want to ask — and I would guess for many of us, a question about suffering would be on that list.

And, in classic Jesus fashion, rather than answer their question, he instead points to something deeper. He indicates that the question of where the affliction came from pales in comparison to reaching out and helping; rather than debating who to blame, suffering can instead be an opportunity for action that displays God's love and grace in this world.

Jesus, in healing, is less interested in discussing a culprit so much as he is interested in addressing and healing the suffering. He changes the lens through which the disciples see the situation. In other words, while we

can draw a connection from sin to suffering, drawing a line from suffering to sin is more difficult.¹

But the reason I love this story is because that miracle, that moment, that healing ... *it isn't even really the focus of this story.*

This story opens with healing — it's the action that sets the story in motion rather than what brings the story to a close. Jesus heals blindness — he literally changes the way someone sees — and THAT'S when the trouble starts. What we might have seen as a story about suffering becomes a story about where and how we see God in this world and in our lives.

The question of the disciples, the one that starts the story, seems to evolve. We begin with who caused this man TO BE BLIND? Then it becomes who caused this man to SEE? Finally, it transforms into asking WHAT does it take to TRULY SEE?

There's a familiar anecdote about a man in the middle of a flood. As the waters gather around his house, friends in a canoe come by and tell him to get in. But the man is insistent: God will save him, so he stays put.

The waters continue to rise and, with water up to his chest on the first floor of his house, a boat arrives. People implore the man to get in, but he refuses. "God will save me!" the man tells them.

Finally, the man is on his roof. The town has been evacuated, but in the distance he hears the thumping of helicopter blades which are heading straight for him. A ladder is lowered as they

tell him to get in before it is too late! Not surprisingly, the man declines. "God will come," he assures them as he waves them off.

The man is swallowed up by the waters and dies. When he appears before God, the man is confused. "Why didn't you save me?"

God, a little perplexed, responds, "I sent a canoe, a boat and a helicopter. What else did you want me to do?"

At its heart, this is a story about seeing. More specifically, how open are we to God acting in ways that don't fit our own narrative and expectations?

So what began with a question from the disciples about physical impairment has become a question about spiritual impairment. In order to judge rightly, one must see rightly; and one question the text brings to the fore is, "What does it take to see?"

There is an entire year behind us. There's an entire year in front of us. I don't know all that you have been through this year. I don't know what hardship you have endured. I don't know if some would say you have, at times, not seemed like yourself, just as the blind man's neighbors claimed. Maybe you identify with some of what happened to the man born blind — maybe you feel like your community has shifted under your feet, maybe you thought your problems were solved only to find out that they have multiplied, maybe you don't see eye to eye with your parents or relatives like you wish was possible.

The year behind, and no doubt the year ahead, at times has

felt or will feel like John 9 — like walking through life and finding difficulty at every turn, or feeling beset upon by difficulty after a life-altering circumstance.

But whatever is happening, Jesus is looking to see and encounter you.

If we are honest with ourselves, we are, at any given moment, a number of the people in this story. Sometimes we won't see right and we'll know it. Sometimes we'll see clearly and experience conflict as a result. And sometimes we'll think we see clearly when in fact we have brownie batter all over our hands.

But no matter who you are and no matter how you see, know that Jesus wants to find you.

And whatever else is happening, an encounter with Jesus will change the way you see. That's not to say encountering Jesus will eliminate the problems you have in your life — this story makes that quite clear. But it will change the way you interact with this world.

Admittedly, there's not exactly a formula for an encounter with Jesus, but I do think there are some things that help.

First, if you do not have a community of faith, I think it is worth committing to one. And if you do, ask yourself if you are connecting in meaningful ways. That might mean coming to worship regularly (or more regularly). It might mean finding a small group. It might mean getting involved in a way you aren't currently. No matter what the case, it is worth asking if you are growing as a result of your involvement. We say this all the

time, but no one can do faith alone. It is so important to seek love and support in a community of faith, and I do believe Jesus shows up when people gather together in faith, but it requires each of us to figure out how we grow in ways we connect with.

Second, be willing to talk about church outside of church. I'll admit that of this list I'm suggesting, this might be the most difficult one for me. I have friends and family that aren't "into church." And I'm definitely sensitive to the ways different people react to stereotypes of church. Church (generically speaking) can have a bad reputation, and whenever I hear stories about such a church, I always think, "Thank goodness Village isn't like that." And yes, that's a little *judgy*.

Village is worth talking about. I think Village is worth inviting people to. If this man born blind was willing to talk about an encounter with a stranger who healed him — if he was willing to stick up for this unknown healer — that should be my inspiration to talk about a place that heals, a place that strives to make everyone feel known and loved and seen. How can I best talk about a place like Village outside of Village?

OK, so find a community that you connect with in meaningful ways and be willing to talk about that community.

Third, commit yourself to service. The more we interact with people who are in need, the more we realize that suffering often has little to do with their

choices and more to do with difficult circumstances that would put any of us in a tailspin. The more we are in service, the more we realize we have the capability to change lives, and the world, for the better. The more we serve, the more we see the world differently — the more we see Christ at work, continuing to heal in ways we don't expect.

Fourth, risk being wrong. That's not to say be wrong on purpose, but seek to find people and opinions that are different than yours and engage with them respectfully and patiently. Look for God in places and people you are sure God is not interested in. Simply put, put yourself in situations that open the possibility for God to work in ways that don't fit into your expectations.

There's an old episode of *I Love Lucy* where Ricky gets home and finds Lucy crawling around on the living room floor. He asks her what she's doing, and she replies that she is looking for her earrings. He says, "You lost your earrings in the living room?"

And she replies, "No, I lost them in the bedroom, but the light is so much better out here."

Sometimes we only seek after God in conditions we deem right according to *our* standards and expectation. Sometimes, in doing so, we risk that we won't find God at all.

One of the biggest concerns I have when I read John 9 is that I might be a Pharisee and not know it — that I might be among those who are sure they see clearly, and thus am most in need of a humility check.

The French writer Anais Nin said, "We don't see things as they are, we see things as we are."

So when you look back at the year behind, who have you been? And as you see things in the year to come, who will you be? Who *can* you be?

It is hard to predict what the next year will hold. But whatever it is, seeking and seeing Jesus in the midst of it will change you — of that I am certain. It will change those around you, and it will shape this world.

Will you pray with me?

¹Sloyan, Gerard. *Interpretation Series: John*. p. 115

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.