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Communion and One  
Great Hour of Sharing

## *“Healed . . . But Alone”*

John 9:1 – 41

Text: They (the Pharisees) answered him (the blind man who was healed), “You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?” And they drove him out.  
. . . John 9:34

This morning’s story from the Gospel of John is both long and unusual – and hopefully the dramatic reading helped you understand what all is going on!

This story is unusual for several reasons. First of all, Jesus acted on his own initiative. Unlike so many of Jesus’ healing miracles, in this story the blind man did not ask to be healed, nor do we get any clue that prior to his healing the blind man even knew Who Jesus was, or that the man had any faith. It seemed that two other things proved catalyst to Jesus’ healing the blind man: the first is the disciples’ question about sin, and second, the fact that it was the Sabbath! It was almost as if Jesus was acting more in response to these issues, than to healing the blind man!

But the other very unusual thing is we get to see a wealth of activity after the healing has happened. And it all happens when Jesus is absent. And what we see is a story of a once blind man who is healed and a society that **cannot** deal with him – they still want him blind. They interrogate him, they persecute him, and they still treat him as an outcast, expelling him from the temple. And the poor guy never asked to be healed in the first place!

Healed, but alone.

Converted, only to be persecuted.

That’s not what we want to see – we want the happy ending.

I don’t believe it is mere coincidence that the form of the narrative corresponds to the story of the church: Jesus comes with blessing and instruction, Jesus departs, and our belief is that Jesus will come again. But now we live in the meantime. The church audience to which John wrote was suffering a great deal and most likely identified closely with the healed once blind man who after Jesus left, received abuse from his family, his neighbors, and the religious leaders.

But first there is this lingering issue of the causal relationship between sin and suffering. If we have misfortune, we must have done something to deserve it.

I came across a story that should once and for all set us straight on this issue. A young man named Kirk was having one of those bad days where everything seemed to go wrong. One thing after another, until, at the close of the day he lay in bed absolutely

exhausted. As he thought over the day he became more and more upset until he finally blurted out, “Why me God? Why does everything always go wrong for me?”

Suddenly the ceiling of his room was pulled back and a huge hand with an outstretched finger came down and poked him in the chest and in a loud and majestic voice thundered, “Because you bug me, Kirk.”

And Jesus struck right at the heart of the traditional, sometimes comforting, **but false and theologically unsound** doctrine of divine earthly retribution. Since ancient times it has been believed that God rewards the virtuous with good health, long life, and prosperity, right here on earth; and punished the sinner with hardship, misfortune, disease, or even death. It’s a very comforting notion, particularly to people for whom things have been going well. It provides a neat, clean unambiguous view of the way the universe works. God takes care of the good people. It’s just as simple as that. The problem is, that life is never as simple as that!

Jesus attempts to dismiss this belief by saying to His disciples, “He (the blind man) was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.” That is a line we will see repeated in next week’s lesson from the raising of Lazarus from the dead.

He was healed, quite simply because God is a God of grace. And grace just doesn’t wash in this world around us. We have a need to earn things, to deserve things; and grace cannot be earned. There is no causality to it. It comes to us . . . free with no strings attached – totally unlike anything else we know from the world. As a matter of fact, grace is so foreign to us that it appears to come from another world. And frequently when we are brought face-to-face with things from another world we resist them, we fight them. We, as the religious leaders did to the once blind man, “throw them out of the Temple.”

You see, being followers of Jesus, ones who have been touched by God’s grace, life doesn’t get any easier for us. As was the case of the once blind man who now feels very alone. Perhaps no biblical story illustrates quite so dramatically the truth of repeated experience: God’s favor more often **leads into**, rather than away from, difficulties. A relationship with God does not remove one from, but often places one in, the line of fire. Those who preach faith as the cessation of pain, suffering, poverty, restless nights and turbulent days are offering false comfort. Notice what happened to the blind man during Jesus’ absence.

The healed man tries to go home again but cannot. So radical is the change in him that his reappearance in the old neighborhood generates no joy, no celebration, no welcome home; only questions and doubts. His insistence that he is the same man gains mixed responses. He **was** well known among these people; he was a blind man who had a stumbling and hesitant walk, he was dependent, and his poverty all gave him his identity and his place in community. But the changes brought on by the healing are dramatic. Now he walks upright, assured of place and direction, quite independent, . . . only to discover that he has no place in that community anymore.

I am reminded of Anne Anderson, the mother of a boy who died of leukemia in Woburn, Massachusetts. Perhaps you know her story, it was, more or less, chronicled in

the 1998 movie, *A Civil Action*, starring John Travolta. When her son was diagnosed she was as crippled with the caring as he was with the disease. But it wasn't only her son, there were several other children affected and a much higher percentage of cancer among all people in her neighborhood. After wallowing for a while in self-pity, she finally went to her minister, The Rev. Bruce Young. With her pastor's support she, in a very real sense, became empowered, healed and had new sight – a vision that brought with it great strength. She researched the toxic waste dumped in her area of Woburn and built a coalition that brought suit against two of the largest employers in Woburn. A settlement was reached, and the battle still goes on. Now Woburn drinks much safer water, but Anne and Bruce are not welcomed with a great deal of joy in the town they tried to save. The legal action she brought threatened the very companies that hired many of Woburn's residents.

And in today's story the blind man is hauled before the Pharisees – whose job it was to both observe and make sure other Jews observed the Law of Moses. Because of this they were interested in all reported miracles, especially if performed by unauthorized individuals and especially if done in some violation of the law. And since Jesus had healed the man on the Sabbath, a day in which no work was to be done, Jesus had violated the Law, and thus He was deemed a sinner – and as a sinner Jesus could not possibly do God's work. And that presented a quandary: if this man is truly healed, it was done by someone with the power of God. But, if the healing took place on the Sabbath, then it was done by someone opposing God's law.

So the Pharisees interrogated his parents and threatened them with expulsion from the synagogue. Whatever joy they may have had in his gaining his sight, it is now drowned in fear. Expulsion from the synagogue and social disgrace is a high price to pay for having a son especially blessed by God. They were unwilling to pay that price, and they responded to the Pharisees, saying, "Why don't you let him speak for himself. He is of age."

So the Pharisees then turn to the blind man – a second time, and even more intensely. Faced with the irrefutable evidence of the healing, the Pharisees try to make the blind man denounce Jesus as a sinner. The poor man, armed only with his experience and sound logic, cannot believe the Pharisees that Jesus was a sinner, for a sinner could not have the healing power of God. Anger and frustration rule: the man is denounced along with Jesus and is expelled as a sinner.

Looking back on the history of the church we see this happening over and over. People have moments of grace that challenge the traditions of the church, and the usual church response is to get locked in, create laws and interpretations that restrict the grace of God. The church was wrong on Latin being the only acceptable language of the Bible, it was wrong on the world being flat, it was wrong saying only men can be priests; it was wrong on slavery; and . . . it just makes you wonder just where the church might be opposing God's grace and transforming love today.

A few short days ago the blind man's life was blessed by Jesus and now his old friends disregard him, his parents reject him, and he is no longer welcomed in his old place of worship.

Ah, . . . the price of being made whole by Jesus.

Are you sure you want Jesus to heal . . . you?!?!?!?

And, . . . uhhh . . . by the way, how do you cope in Jesus' absence?

But the story doesn't end there – in the last seven verses of the story, Jesus returns. The healed man meets and confesses faith in Jesus and becomes a disciple. As Jesus said, “those who do not see may see” while the Pharisees, who think they see, are told they are really blind.

This story shows us that Jesus enlightens the ignorant and confounds the arrogant. The healing has made it clear: those of us who think we can see, like the Pharisees in the story, are blind. We cannot interpret the world in terms of sin and just deserts, but as Jesus said, this is done in terms of occasions for divine glory. No rules about what can and cannot be done on the Sabbath can restrict God. Those who think they know the proper way to worship and follow God, . . . we do not see; for God's ways are not our ways. All rules and laws do is to preserve the status quo as we humans know it. Rules and laws only try to capture and hold “yesterday's will of God.” They do not permit breakthroughs – conversions of grace – if you will. To think we have the sight to understand God – well that's the sin of which we are guilty. The creature cannot fathom the Creator.

That last line – “If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘We see’, your sin remains.” That kind of pulls the rug out from any temptation for us to say “thus sayeth the Lord.” For as long as we proclaim “We see!” over against anyone else; well, then our sin remains.

It would seem to me that there is only one stance we can take and that is to sing and pray as humbly and doxologically as God's amazing grace allows; proclaiming, “Was blind, but now I see!” For those who recognize that life is blindness without Christ, grace and peace is given.