

Discipleship in the Lectionary - 03/19/2023



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Fourth Sunday in Lent

Revised Common Lectionary Year A

Sunday, March 19th

John 9:1-41

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A failure to see

The Gospel lection for the Fourth Sunday in Lent is the third example in a row of coming to faith in the Gospel of John. Two weeks ago, it was Nicodemus. Last week it was the Samaritan woman at the well. This week is the case of the man born blind. Like the previous two examples, the blind man's coming to faith journey is demonstrated by his escalating testimony (9:12, 17, 33 and 38). This week's encounter differs in that there is also a healing. In John's Gospel such physical signs point to deeper spiritual meanings. This encounter has the familiar theme of water as a means by which Jesus heals the blind man. Water is also featured in the encounter with Nicodemus and the woman at the well. The encounter with the blind man also has a strong theme of sight as inward illumination which is also featured in the encounter with Nicodemus. Sinfulness is another theme that runs through this passage, beginning with a question about the sin of the blind man, the Pharisees discussing the sinfulness of Jesus, and the passage ending with the sin of the Pharisees. The irony of this encounter is that a blind man sees what the religious authorities do not. It begs the question, what might we be failing to see? Where might there be spiritual blindness in our lives?

John 9:1-41 Commentary

Jesus went to Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles or Booths (7:1-10) and there are two connections between this feast and this lectionary text. First, during the festival there is a parade of worshipers led by the priest to the pool of Siloam (where Jesus told the blind man to bathe his eyes) in order to fill a golden pitcher with water from the pool that is used in the ceremonies. During this festival there is also a time when candles are lit to symbolize the light of God's revealed Word - the connection between light/sight and revelation. In the text, Jesus identifies Himself as the "Light of the World (9:5). The previous connections here to Jesus' promise of Living Water (4:10; 7:37-39) and the Light of the World (1:4-5; 8:12) are not lost. This festival was also commemorated by people living in leafy shelters as a reminder of God dwelling among them in the tabernacle during the wanderings in the wilderness. The connection here with John 1:14 cannot be missed: "*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us...*" The Greek word for "dwelt" (*eskēnōsen*) means to dwell as in a tent, to encamp, to have my tabernacle. Jesus thus *tabernacled* among us.

¹ As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. ² And his disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" ³ Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed 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 *Having said these things, he spit on the ground and made mud with the saliva. Then he anointed the man's eyes with the mud* ⁷ *and said to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). So he went and washed and came back seeing.*

The whole episode is initiated by Jesus' disciples asking about the source of the sin that resulted in the man being born blind. In ancient Judaism, suffering was directly related to sin. As the question reveals, the sin, according to ancient Judaism, could have either been committed by his parents or by the man while still an unborn in the womb. Jesus indicates how sometimes God in His providence for reasons unknown and mysterious to us will sometimes allow people to suffer to experience God's mercy and power. Jesus here refers to "day" as while He is in the world and "night" as the crucifixion - an underscore of the light and dark theme throughout John. Verse 5 is one of the so-called "I am" statements of Jesus in John that have allusions to Exodus 3:14.

Some point to Jesus' use of mud as an allusion to Genesis 2:7 where God created man out of dust. Here the Creator recreates.

⁸ *The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar were saying, "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?"* ⁹ *Some said, "It is he." Others said, "No, but he is like him." He kept saying, "I am the man."* ¹⁰ *So they said to him, "Then how were your eyes opened?"* ¹¹ *He answered, "The man called Jesus made mud and anointed my eyes and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' So I went and washed and received my sight."* ¹² *They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know."*

In this case the formerly blind man recounts what happens. He refers here to "the man called Jesus."

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 *So the Pharisees again asked him how he had received his sight. And he said to them, "He put mud on my eyes, and I washed, and I see."* ¹⁶ *Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath." But others said, "How can a man who is a sinner do such signs?" And there was a division among them.* ¹⁷ *So they said again to the blind man, "What do you say about him, since he has opened your eyes?" He said, "He is a prophet."*

The focus of the Pharisees is not awe or wonder but the fact that Jesus broke their rules for the Sabbath. In their mind Jesus must have been a sinner. The man born blind now refers to Jesus 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 how he now sees we do not know, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself."* ²² *(His parents said these things because they feared the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone should confess Jesus to be Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue.)* ²³ *Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him."*

The Jews (most likely Jewish authorities as per the note in the ESV) still did not believe. They call his parents who apparently fear being cast out of the synagogue if they were to acknowledge Jesus as the Christ (the Messiah). This was a common occurrence to John's audience too.

²⁴ *So for the second time they called the man who had been blind and said to him, "Give glory to God. We know that this man is a sinner."* ²⁵ *He answered, "Whether he is a sinner I do not know. 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 And 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, "Why, this is an amazing 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 if anyone is a worshiper of God and does his will, God listens to him."³² Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a man born blind."³³ If this man were not from God, he could do nothing."³⁴ They answered him, "You were born in utter sin, and would you teach us?" And they cast him out.

They call the man back for more testimony. The Jewish authorities see Jesus as a sinner and advise the man to give glory to God for his healing. Next is the very powerful response of the man. He simply shares his testimony which none can refute: *"Whether he is a sinner I do not know. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see."*

When pressed again for how he was healed, the man becomes emboldened. He not only accuses them of not listening but asks them *"Do you also want to become his disciples?"* This quite humorous statement reveals that the man considers himself to be a disciple of Jesus. Not surprisingly, this statement antagonizes the leaders - *"they reviled him,"* and proudly claim their identity as disciples of Moses yet apparently miss what Moses prophesized.

A remarkable thing happens. The man born blind just recently on the fringes of society, an outcast, a sinner, and having no education, is now in front of the Jewish leaders lecturing them about God. This point is not lost on them either! They cast him out. Note the escalating testimony of the man.

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

The final interaction between the man born blind occurs perhaps hours or days later. The man born blind continues to respond to the revelation of Christ. He responds as all believers do: *"Lord, I believe."* We read how the man then worships Jesus. No Jew would worship anything less than God. The fact that Jesus does not prevent the man from worshipping Him precisely underscores the identity of the man called Jesus.

³⁹ Jesus said, "For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind."⁴⁰ Some of the Pharisees near him heard these things, and said to him, "Are we also blind?"⁴¹ Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would have no guilt; but now that you say, 'We see,' your guilt remains.

Some Pharisees were onlookers to the above interaction between the man born blind and Jesus. Jesus did not force belief on the man born blind or the Pharisees. He simply acted in a way that revealed God's glory. The man born blind responded to what was revealed. For the Pharisees it was their pride and knowledge that blinded them from the truth.

Reflections

In comparison with the encounters between Jesus and Nicodemus and Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well, the encounter between Jesus and the man born blind follows a similar pattern of escalating response by the man. First, he sees Jesus as a man. Then he refers to Him as a prophet. He then confesses to being His disciple. Such escalation occurs while the man gives an increasingly passionate testimony. Finally, he accepts Jesus as God and worships Him.

There are various studies in our society that have collected data on people ages when they report first making a decision to follow Christ. What emerges is the so-called 4-14 window. This is the age window of the vast majority (up to 85 percent) of people when they make a decision to follow Christ. Conversely, 4 percent or less of the total decisions occur in people older than 30. This is profound. Perhaps once we become adults, we think we know too much about the world and are too proud to accept our spiritual blindness. In our postmodern society it is not that we are blind to the truth - we are not even willing to accept there is any absolute truth! Indeed, it is offensive to suggest there is only one cure for spiritual blindness and that cure is Jesus Christ.

Just like the highly religious Pharisees were spiritually blind to the point of knowing the Law inside and out yet they missed the very presence of God in their midst, even as Christians we run the risk of being blinded to the notion of the superiority of our own traditions and presuppositions of church, evangelism, and what it means to be a disciple. There would hardly be 33,000 Christian denominations in the world if this were not the case! A fair reflective question is to ask where might there be spiritual blindness in our lives?

If we are willing to accept our blindness and lean only on the Logos for understanding, our walk as disciples will no doubt mirror those of Nicodemus, the woman at the well and the man born blind - one of escalating belief and action born from faith.

"...One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." [John 9:25]

Application

- To what extent are you open to the Holy Spirit working in your life?
- To what extent might you be blinded by tradition and religion?
- Is there a pathway of escalating belief and action in your discipleship walk?



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