

“Seeking: Who Sinned?”
John 9

How many of us fall into the trap of dealing with challenges through blame? My friend Margaret told me that when her three children were young and the blame game was at its height in their home, she devised a plan to stop her children from blame. She assigned one person to blame for everything that would go wrong that day no matter who was responsible. After two weeks of this, the children learned their lesson and stopped blaming each other. The temptation of blame is rooted in our need to control and to make sense of life. When bad things happen, blame may seem to give a sense of control over the situation. An extreme example of this comes from the Westboro Baptist Church in Kansas. This is the church that has become known for blaming human suffering on people’s sin. They protest at military funerals with signs that say things like, “Thanks God for Dead Soldier.” It was interesting to listen to the healing journey of one of the insiders of that church. Her name is Megan Phelps-Roper and she is the grand-daughter of Fred Phelps, the founder and pastor of Westboro Baptist Church. She grew up believing that God was punishing humans all the time. Here is a part of her TED Talk: <https://youtu.be/bVV2Zk88beY>.

The most dangerous part of the blame game is that it robs us of our ability to see God in others and in ourselves. We become blind to seeing the dignity and beauty of every human life and of every creature. Our Bible story demonstrates this kind of blindness. At first, we think of physical blindness as the only problem but as the story progresses, we realize that the most challenging form of blindness is that of the people who refused to see the work of God in their midst. The story is about a blind man who gets healed by Jesus. This is a very dramatic story with a lot of action and conflict. We know that the conflict was building up between Jesus and the religious authorities in Jerusalem. Jesus was proclaiming the message of God’s light coming into the world through him to renew the faith of the people of Israel. In the Gospel of John there are seven signs that show us Jesus’ message to the world. Today’s story is the sixth sign. It is a story of healing which has a lot more to it than just the cure for physical blindness. From earlier chapters in John’s Gospel, we know how important seeing is for following Jesus. People had to see for themselves and not just be told about Jesus. There were social and spiritual kinds of blindness which Jesus was seeking to heal. There were more people who needed to be healed from blindness than the one who was identified as the blind man.

According to the understanding of the people in Jesus’ time, the blind man was an outcast in society. Blindness was often viewed in ancient times as punishment for sin. The disciples of Jesus and the leaders who opposed him assumed this. Many in that culture and time saw that the blind man did not deserve love or healing. He only deserved scorn and disrespect. This is hard for us to relate to but think back on our understanding (or lack of it) of AIDS or alcoholism and the social prejudices that went with those diseases. The blindness of the disciples and society was evident from the debate that ensued after the healing about whose fault it was that the man was blind.

But through God's wisdom and love Jesus broke the rules of his day to share God's light. Biblical scholar Richard Rohrbaugh speaks of an ancient custom of spitting in the presence of the blind in order to protect oneself from the "evil eye." Jesus transformed that act of disdain into one of healing. Let's watch a part of the story and then we will read the rest of it:

<https://fb.watch/qBDJdoZutg/>

Now let's listen to the reaction of the disciples and the religious leaders to this healing. Let's listen to John 9:18-41

¹⁸The Temple authorities refused to believe that this one had been blind and had begun to see, until they summoned the parents. "Is this your child?" they asked, "and if so, do you attest that your child was blind at birth? How do you account for the fact that now your child can see?"

The parents answered, we know this is our child, blind from birth. But how our child can see now, or who opened those blind eyes, we have no idea. But don't ask us --our child is old enough to speak without us!" The parents answered this way because they were afraid of the Temple authorities, who had already agreed among themselves that anyone who acknowledged Jesus as the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. That was why they said, "Our child is of age and should be asked directly."

A second time they summoned the one who had been born blind and said, "Give God the glory instead; we know that this Jesus is a sinner."

"I don't know whether he's a sinner or not," the man answered. "All I know is that I used to be blind and now I can see." They persisted, "just what did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?"

"I already told you, but you won't listen to me," came the answer. "Why do you want to hear it all over again? Don't tell me you want to become disciples of Jesus too!"

They retorted scornfully, "you're the one who is Jesus' disciple. We are disciples of Moses. We know that God spoke to Moses, but we have no idea where this Jesus comes from."

The man retorted: "well, this is news! You don't know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes! We know that God doesn't hear sinners, but that if people are devout and obey God's will, God listens to them. It is unheard of that anyone ever gave sight to a person blind from birth. If this one were not from God, he could never have done such a thing!"

"What!" they exclaimed. "You're steeped in sin from birth, and you're giving us lectures?" With that they threw the man out.

When Jesus heard of the expulsion, he sought out the healed man and asked, “Do you believe in the Chosen One?”

The man answered, “Who is this One, that I may believe?”

“You’re looking at him,” Jesus replied. “The Chosen One is speaking to you now.”

The healed man said, “yes, I believe,” and worshipped Jesus.

And Jesus said, “I came into this world to execute justice -to make the sightless see and the seeing world blind.”

Some of the Pharisees who were nearby heard this and said, “You’re not calling us blind, are you?”

To which Jesus replied, “If you were blind, there would be no sin in that. But since you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.”

Jesus was able to heal the physical blindness, but not the spiritual blindness of the leaders, those who supposedly see, remained. Jesus turned the whole question “Who Sinned?” on its head. The one who was judged as sinful was the one who could see, while the ones who thought they were sinless were actually the ones who were blind.

Can this question “who sinned?” help us today to let go of judgment, blame, and fear to embrace a deeper vision of life? Can it help us to see the sacredness of all of life? Can we learn to be attentive to the inner seeing ability that we have inside of each of us?

In her poem “Jesus in the psych ward” based on this text, Rev. Sarah Speed writes this, He’s in group therapy, plastic chairs in a circle.

Paper cups with weak coffee. Everyone in the room has seeking eyes.

The Pharisees admitted him. They said things like,

He’s more than we can handle. They let the rumors fly.

The other patients like him. They say, He listens to me.

He calls them by name.

And when one of them asks,

Is this our fault? Are we here because we sinned?

Jesus does not wait for the facilitator to speak.

He crosses the circle. He kneels down. He grabs their hands

in his and says,

Child of the covenant, God loves you too much to ever wish you pain.

Bodies and minds crumble sometimes, but God’s love for you does not.

And after that

there were happy tears and the group was dismissed to lunch,

where they broke bread and no one talked of sin.

I would like you to remain with the words of love here. Imagine yourself at the table with Christ invited to feast on his love, his friendship, and his healing presence. Let him welcome you with these words:

Child of the covenant, God loves you too much to ever wish you pain.

Bodies and minds crumble sometimes, but God's love for you does not.

And now take a few moments to behold him and to thank him for his love. Amen.