

Seeing Beyond Us and Them A Retelling of John 9

“He saw me.” That’s the first key line in this story about Jesus and me. As he and his disciples were walking along, he saw me. I had not said anything. I was not a yeller like my buddy Bartimaeus, whose insistent voice Jesus heard over the crowd. No, he saw me.

Now, I know it is not that unusual for blind people or people with other visible disabilities to be quickly seen. I am told there is something about the scanning human eye that picks up difference very quickly. I was not hard to see. Sitting by the side of the road, like so many blind people who are forced to be beggars because people did not think we could do anything else. While I could not see who was coming, I was profoundly aware of the comings and goings in my usual location, and always wondering if anyone would be approaching or speaking to me. While we may be quickly picked out, we are not often approached. Much less spoken to. So sometimes it seems like we are just as invisible to those who can see as they are to us.

Then, wouldn’t you know it, his disciples speak and before anyone has said “hello” or shared names, I am the occasion for a theological question: “Rabbi, Who sinned? This man or his parents, that he was born blind?” I have to tell you, that was not the first time I had heard someone repeat that common assumption about why I was blind: It had to be somebody’s fault. Behind their “who sinned?” question was the “Why?” question, the question that humans so quickly ask when encountering or facing something that they assume involves suffering or when something happens that disrupts their sense of control over life’s journey.

Sometimes there’s an answer to that question, like when blindness is caused by a disease, or lameness by physical violence or war, or brain injury when someone falls out of a chariot. But when someone is born with a disability, the question is harder. Maybe it runs in the family. But it is funny. People seem to ask that about disability much more than they do getting an illness or dying from an infection. Maybe it is because they think anybody can get those kinds of diseases or health conditions, but only some people get a disability. Hah, do they have something to learn! Disability is the world’s most inclusive minority. Anyone can join, any time, in the blink of an eye. And everyone, like it or not, will spend some part of their life, usually in their later years, with some form of disability. None of us are invulnerable.

Usually there’s not a good answer to the Why? question. Thinking it was my fault or my parents just shows their need for an easy, but bad, answer. Does there have to be a reason for my being born blind? Not every living thing on this earth comes to life in perfect condition. In fact, every living thing comes with limits and with imperfections. But that does not keep them from thriving. That’s a longer theological discussion that I would like to have with the disciples.

But I did not get a chance to talk because Jesus just changed their question. He cut the link between sin and disability. My blindness was neither my fault, nor my parents, but that “God’s work might be revealed in him. We must do the works of him who sent me, while it still day and we still can. As long as I am here, I am the light of the world.”

Now, I admit I did not understand all that but I did not have time to ask. I heard him approach me, spit on the ground, and then spread some mud on my eyes, and told me to "Go and wash in the pool of Siloam." And I did not meet him again until after all kinds of hell broke loose, which we will get to. But right then, I listened, did what he told me, and went to the pool of Siloam. Why not? He sounded pretty confident. And besides, I had to wash my face somewhere. So I listened, followed, and, lo and behold, I could see!

So what do you think I did? Went right back to tell everyone, and find Jesus, but what happened? A bunch of people in my own community did not think it was actually me. They knew me as the blind beggar by the road who looked and acted like blind beggars were supposed to. They could not recognize me acting differently, as someone with a voice, with agency, wanting to share my excitement at my healing. They really never had seen me. I was a type, not a person.

But others recognized me and asked, of course, "How is it that you can now see?" I did not know. I could only repeat what happened. They asked me where he was. That's what I was hoping they could tell me. So they decided to take me to the Pharisees, the religious experts who would supposedly know how it was that I could now see.

I forgot to say until now that all this happened on a Sabbath. I repeated the story to them. What did the Pharisees say? "He should not have done that. Jesus broke the sabbath traditions, so he must be a sinner, and sinners cannot make the blind see."

So bingo, all over again, I am pulled right back into a theological argument about sinning and who can do what, and when. They asked me who I thought Jesus was? I didn't know. He didn't tell me. But I know what happened was pretty spectacular. So, in my book, he must have been a holy man, a prophet.

Then they did not believe I really had been blind. So what did they do? Like so many other people do when they encounter a person with a disability, they talked my parents rather than directly to me. I mean, I got sort of used to it growing up. When we could afford to eat at a restaurant, the server always asked my parents what I wanted. Just because I was blind did not mean I could not hear or could make my own choices. Go talk to other people with disabilities. They will also tell you that people seem to assume that if you have one disability, you must have others as well. Can't walk? They will talk to you really loudly. Can't hear, even louder, or assume you just don't understand anything.

But my folks, God bless them! They said, "Yes, he's our son. He was born blind." "But we have no idea how he can now see or who did it. He's a grown adult. Ask him! He can talk for himself." You want to know how that man with a disability feels or what he thinks? Ask him. They were great!

Then the Pharisees called me back in for more questioning, or, really, more of telling me what to think about my own experience, like lots of so called experts do. "He cannot be a prophet, because he is a sinner, so you should give thanks and glory to God for healing you." What is it

with this fascination with sinning and ruling someone out by category? So I said, "I don't know about his being a sinner. I do know I was blind, but now I see."

That just seemed to make them mad. "What did he do? How did he open your eyes?" That got me frustrated. "I just told you. You want me to tell you again? Do you all want to become his disciples?" I should have said what my parents said: "He is of age, go talk to him." But they then accused me of being his disciple, and that they, having the credentials of knowing what God said to Moses, were the real arbiters of truth. Credentials trumped capability and experience once again, as they so often do.

Now see, here is where they went wrong. They did not know that I had grown up listening to rabbis and Pharisees. What I had really wanted to do was to become one, to study the Laws and the Prophets, and discuss complex theological questions. That calling was what I wanted to do with my life, but it was dismissed because I must be a sinner. So I simply now said what seemed perfectly obvious and logical: "Look, we know God does not listen to sinners, but to those who worship him and obey his will. If this man was not from God, he could not have opened my eyes nor done anything else." That just got them madder, because it did sort of imply that if they were truly righteous, they should have been able to do the same thing. It was kind of like my friend who could not walk and got so tired of people telling him that if his faith was strong enough, he could be healed, that one day he then replied, "If your faith was strong enough, you could cure me." But they dismissed my argument out of hand. "You were born blind. You have nothing to teach us." Their label defined for them what I could do. I got thrown out in a heartbeat.

But it also showed how little they knew of the Law and prophets. If a disabled man could not teach them anything, they had missed the fact that Moses wanted to beg off God's call because of a speech impediment. Or that Jacob was a changed man after his limp from wrestling with the angel. Or that Saul got depressed, Elisha got suicidal, Jeremiah called crazy. Their battles with some form of disability did not make them sinners. They became leaders. Jewish folk heroes. Revered ancestors and teachers.

It is an interesting question, "What does disability teach us?" Too often, as I said earlier I became the object lesson for being a sinner because I was blind. But the opposite also happens. Sometimes people tell me I am so inspiring because of what I can do, or, my capacity to ask really good questions and debate critical issues. So one lesson puts me on a pedestal, the other in the pits. Every person with a disability, or every parent of a person with a disability that I know, just wants to be seen as a person, someone trying the best they can, someone who deserves to have the opportunity to grow and use their gifts in God's service to the world like anybody else. That's why I hate the word "special."

But back to my story. A little while later, a man came up to me who heard about the Pharisees kicking me out and asked me if I believed in the Son of Man. I did not know this was Jesus. After all, I didn't see him before. "Yes I do, but who is he?" He respectfully answered me: "You have seen him, and he's the one talking to you right now." Right then, I knew it was him. My faith that he was God's son was born. I knew what had happened to me. I knew it was God working through him, with me, of all people. My faith became a given.

It was remarkable to me that he sought me out again after that first encounter. But even more so, my faith was given to me through my healing, not that my healing was given to me because of my faith. I had gotten used to people saying, “You know, if you really were a man of faith, or your parents had been, you would not be blind.” There was no way out of that. I could have thought that if I had enough faith, God would cure me. But lots of people who have way more faith than I do never got cured of an illness that happened to them. Then it is worse, because if you are not cured, then obviously you don’t have enough faith. Both of them miss the power of God’s redeeming love, coming through Jesus or whoever is doing the works of the God who sends us.

So my story ended up being a lesson about the human propensity to judge others through a single lens, a single category, a single label, and how that judgment is so often wrong. That lens, in my case, was “disability and sinner” It could have been just disability. The people who thought they knew how God worked, could not believe what happened right under their noses. And the people who knew they were blind, perhaps he was saying we could really see much more than people thought we could. Some of the Pharisees got close when they asked Jesus “So we are not blind, are we?” Jesus answered with a paradox: “If you say you see, you may be blind. And if you know you are blind, you see.” Humility and curiosity are the first steps in learning and ongoing growth. The question is how we then respond to the opportunity to reveal God’s works to whoever and whatever is in our path.

Now, as a former blind man, I am not saying you are one or the other. I will tell you that sometimes I get frustrated by hearing blindness used as a metaphor for people’s lack of understanding, or lameness for lack of action, or deafness for not listening. But I also realize that when Jesus did that, he was talking to and about the people who were in power who thought they were anything but blind, lame, or deaf. So be careful. Why use a label that defines real physical conditions to criticize other people’s thinking or acting?

The real lesson is to be careful with any label or category that separates people into categories of any kind, righteous or sinners, disabled or “normal,” and even “Pharisee” or “follower of Christ.” (Remember, I wanted to be one) We are all multiple stories. We all need interventions of God’s grace and are called to be intervenors with God’s grace, manifesting that grace “by doing the works we were sent to do as people of faith.” You don’t have to cure someone to do that. The opportunities abound, whether talking about religion, race, country of origin, politics, or more. How do we follow? We do what Jesus did: He **saw me** in a crowd, **he changed the question and argument about my condition**. He **responded to my immediate need**, he **acted when he had the opportunity**, **sent me forth with the responsibility to do something**, **found me again to see how I was**, and, in the end, asked **me have faith in my experience of grace and what happened in the face of judgment, intimidation, and fear**. Like others whom he healed that I heard about, I was sent back into the community of faith as a believer and follower. In my case, I am still hoping I get a chance to learn and teach.

Maybe one of his disciples will write down this story. Who knows? The stories about him did seem to get around very quickly. It may help others learn for a long time. I hope so.

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