

It's Messy

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John 9:8-16 — The neighbors and those who had seen the blind man before as a beggar began to ask, "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?" Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him." He kept saying, "I am the man." But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" He answered, "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' Then I went and washed and received my sight." They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know." They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, "He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see." Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath." But others said, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" And they were divided.

When I worked at a boarding school for Deaf and Deaf-Blind children, I often thought of the disciples' question at the beginning of this chapter, in our first reading: "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" I felt as if I could hear echoes of that question in the words, stares, and avoidance of people passing by our school's students. Within many cultures, both ancient and modern, there is a longstanding tradition of linking blindness to sin. As the idea goes, divine punishment must be behind the uncommon lack of physiological vision, and in this lack, justice is somehow being served. And even in cultures where these ideas about divine punishment and justice are not explicitly articulated anymore (at least not often), there is nevertheless a sense of shame subtly imposed on blind people and their families. The imposition isn't so subtle in our reading. Quite possibly, the blind man himself hears as the disciples ask, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

The idea behind this question may seem archaic to us, but I'd suggest that we are more familiar with this way of thinking than we realize. Perhaps we don't think about blindness specifically in this way, but how do we think about other situations, like homelessness or imprisonment? For many of us, it is easy to assume that, generally speaking, justice is being served. Like the disciples, when we encounter a seemingly unfortunate or potentially unjust situation, we can be eager to explain what exactly went wrong and eager to believe that what has happened should have happened. It's an understandable desire: we want to live in a world where people get what they deserve. We want to believe that we ourselves have done good things and definitely deserve the good things we've gotten, and we want to believe that those other people have done bad things and definitely deserve the bad things they've gotten. So, we ask questions like "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he is on the streets?" and we crave simple, single-sentence answers.

But life is often more complex than such answers, and Jesus knows it. “Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” he says, “and through this man’s blindness, God’s love and God’s power will be made manifest.” Jesus’ words must have come as a surprise to the disciples. In their minds, blindness is something shameful, and God is not to be associated with shameful things. Like many of us, the disciples are used to thinking in categories of good and bad, clean and unclean, noble and shameful, and it is easy to assume that these categories are totally divided and clearly apparent. But again, life is often more complex than this — and so is God’s work in the world. God can bring good out of bad, God can declare “clean” what was once unclean, God can take what the world calls “shameful” and turn it into something beautiful. The work of God is not easily pinned down or put in a box, because God’s love and God’s power tend to show up in all sorts of places that surprise us.

What is most surprising to me about this story, though, is not *where* God’s power shows up, but *how* it shows up. Aren’t you a bit perplexed by Jesus’ actions here? He spits on the ground, makes mud with his spit, spreads it on the man’s eyes, then tells him to go wash it off in a specific pool. And only after all of that does the man receive eyesight. I can’t help but wonder: If Jesus is able to miraculously impart vision to this blind man, why does he go to all of this trouble? I mean, couldn’t he have just said “Be healed” right then and there? Think about all of the steps Jesus takes here. In order to make mud with his spit, he’s got to get down on the ground and actually mix together a concoction. Now, I’m not trying to be gross, but I imagine that just a single spit wouldn’t be enough to congeal much dirt. I imagine that Jesus had to spit into the ground multiple times before he could use his fingers to create a decent amount of dirt paste. Doesn’t sound particularly pleasant to me, either. Then, once Jesus has made this stuff, he’s got to get up in this stranger’s personal space and spread the paste onto his eyelids. And then, to top it off, the miracle doesn’t take effect until the man finds his way to a specific pool and then *wipes off* the stuff that Jesus just spent time mixing together and putting on him! I think it’s worth asking: Why does Jesus bother to get his hands dirty? Why does he choose to touch this man’s body in such an odd and awkward way? Why the hassle of the blind man going to the pool with mud on his face? Honestly, couldn’t Jesus have just said “Shazam!” and been done with it?

Here’s the message I get from this story, friends: healing is often messy. We’d certainly like it to be straightforward. We’d like it to be tidy. We’d like to just get it over with quickly and not let anyone else see us in the process. But by and large, that’s not the way healing works, and even miracles can take time and effort. People in 12-step recovery programs know this. They know that there are no magic words for healing. They know that we don’t heal by covering up or by just pushing through. They know that true healing, deep healing, is laborious and painful, awkward and intimate. We heal by acknowledging our weakness and lack of control to our Higher Power. We heal by engaging in rigorous self-reflection; we heal by honestly acknowledging our own wrongs and earnestly attempting to make amends, when possible; and we heal by surrounding ourselves with a community of support, by sharing our journey with others and joining others on theirs. It’s messy. But ultimately, there is meaning and even joy in the mess of healing.

Now, when Jesus miraculously gives eyesight to this blind man, it's not just messy in the sense of dirt and spit; it is also messy with regards to religious tradition. In our second reading, the ten verses or so following the actual healing, we see religious leaders who are baffled and offended: *Why would Jesus heal on the sabbath?* For some religious leaders, a good deed that violates a cherished tradition is no good deed at all. Even acts of healing and growth are discredited if they fail to honor those norms and rules that the religious leaders hold most dear.

In general, tradition tries to keep things clean and tidy. That's all well and good, Jesus says. But sometimes, we are called to get our hands dirty. And when those times come — as they do throughout Jesus' ministry, and as they will throughout ours — religious tradition always comes second to the work of God. May we not be afraid to get our hands dirty, friends. May we not be afraid of the mess. Amen.