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St. Thomas Evangelical Lutheran Church, Bloomington, Indiana

1 Samuel 16:1-13; Psalm 23; Ephesians 5:8-14; John 9:1-41

Dividing the World Into 'Us' and 'Them'

John 9:1-41

As he walked along, Jesus saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this person or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither this person nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of the one who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." When Jesus had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent).

Then he went and washed and came back able to see. The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, "Is this not the person 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 he." 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 person 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 person is not from God, for he does not observe the Sabbath." Others said, "How can a person who is a sinner perform such signs?" And they were divided. So they said again to the blind person, "What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened." He said, "He is a prophet."

The Judeans 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 and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" His parents answered, "We know that this is our son and that he was born blind, but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself." His parents said this because they were afraid of the Judeans, who had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him."

So for the second time they called the person who had been blind, and they said to him, "Give glory to God! We know that this person is a sinner." He answered, "I do not know

whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" 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?" Then they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this person, we do not know where he comes from."

The man answered, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but does listen to one who is devout and obeys God's will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this person were not from God, he could do nothing." They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" And they drove him out.

Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him he said, "Do you believe in the Child of Humanity?" He answered, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him." Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." He said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped Jesus. Jesus said, "I came into this world for judgment, so that those who do not see may see and those who do see may become blind." Some of the Pharisees who were with him heard this and said to him, "Surely we are not blind, are we?" Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains.

What a story! How different it becomes when we read the whole chapter. If we had stopped after just the first seven verses, it would have been a simple healing story - miraculous, but like so many other healing stories in the Gospels.

While it feels obvious to us on this side of history, Jesus made a very important—and challenging—statement. Disability, mental illness, and sickness are not the results of sin, whether by the individual or the people they love, but rather the result of living in a broken world where genes do not always work the way they are designed and germs interfere. While I don't necessarily like his conclusion about the person's blindness—that he had to endure a life of blindness just so God could show off—the story really goes off the rails after that when everyone else got involved. Instead of rejoicing that someone who was born blind could now see, the matter must be investigated, debated and torn apart until no one is rejoicing at all.

When I read this story, I am quick to cast judgment. I wonder why the man's neighbors had to call in others to debate this miracle. Why did they have to start all this ruckus? Then there are the Pharisees who came together to debate—and the ones who are so sure that Jesus is a sinner. But he works miracles, so obviously they are wrong! And then the

Judeans who drag in the person's parents to testify? Hadn't his parents been through enough hardship, raising a blind child in a world that had no sympathy for that?

And then after everything, they didn't trust the man's testimony of his own experience and made him go through it all again, and his truth-telling ended up with his expulsion from the synagogue.

I don't like how these people act in the story—and if it were up to me, I would just expel them all. I wouldn't want anything to do with them and I don't see a place for them, yet my exclusion of them embodies what I want to condemn.

Or as the old adage says, When you point a finger at others, you'll find three pointing back at you. In my certainty that I see what is right, I become blind to my own sin.

But isn't that so easy to do? Our default is to judge. In many ways, it's a survival mechanism. The problem is that what helps us survive in the wilderness doesn't always help us live faithfully in community. We need to be able to look at mushrooms and know which ones are good to eat and which ones will kill us. When a cat of some sort comes our way, we need to know quickly whether to run and hide or bend down to pet it. But without realizing it, we transfer this instinct to our human interactions. We want to decide who is on our side and who is not, which becomes who is in and who is out.

This judgment comes from a place of fear, worrying about what will threaten our survival. When I can step out of my own fear whether I would be judged and found wanting, I can examine the fears others bring to the situation.

While they may be rooted in fear, the Judeans' arguments and investigations in this story are, in a way, a sign of faithfulness - to God and to the people. If they did not care about faithfulness, they would not argue. Seen this way, the debate about Jesus healing on the Sabbath isn't just nitpicking. For them, it's about protecting the very identity and survival of their people.

Living under Roman occupation, disruptions could threaten their fragile autonomy. Any disturbance might be interpreted as the beginnings of a rebellion, which Rome would quickly and violently suppress. So it was safer for all in Judea to keep their heads down and keep the peace.

Being surrounded by non-Jews, their identity as the people of God was constantly under threat. Sabbath-keeping was one of the ways they held onto that identity as those who followed the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Stopping for the Sabbath was a sign that they trusted God to continue the work of creation without them. It set them apart from others and reminded them of the covenant God made with them at Sinai.

But more than that, according to Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel in his book *The Sabbath*, the Pharisees believed that a perfect, universally observed Sabbath would bring about the immediate redemption of Israel—even the world. For a people longing for freedom, debating the rules and enforcing them made sense.

We might not believe that the redemption of the world depends on our actions in quite the same way, yet we slip into similar patterns of judgment. We worry about who is practicing Christianity correctly and who is not. It is right to be concerned about the ways Scripture is used to bludgeon people. It is right to be concerned about the ways God is used to bless unjust and unholy actions. It is right to be concerned about the ways Christianity is blended with patriotism to exclude and diminish others. Yet we get distracted among ourselves by arguments about which mission takes precedence, how to do things. We moralize our preferences and turn them into laws. We spend our time rehashing our old arguments with others to reassert our correctness.

Yet we cannot stand in a position of superiority, believing we have it all right. We seek more and more information but fail to put what we learn into practice. We search so hard for the perfect action that we end up not acting at all. We spend so much time deciding who is right and who is wrong that we struggle to trust anyone.

Whether we judge from fear or from a sense of superiority, it is easier to divide the world into “us” and “them.” But whenever we draw lines between ourselves and others, Jesus always seems to end up on the other side.

The man who was born blind may have been thrown out of the synagogue, but as pastor and poet Steven Garnaas-Holmes wrote, “Whenever you are thrown out, you land in the lap of Jesus.” (See Note 1) Jesus was there to welcome him and embrace him and I believe that is true of everyone we are tempted to “throw out”.

This is what Jesus does with our neat, simple categories. Jesus turns our conventional wisdom of understanding on its head and turns our categories upside down, or perhaps rightside up.

In his prayer for peace, Francis wrote, “O Lord, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console, to be understood as to understand, to be loved as to love.” In order to do that, we have to move ourselves—and our fear—from the center. We must let go of the certainty that we alone know the right way to do things and trust in the work of the Spirit. We are called to work the works of the one who sent Jesus—and us—so that God’s work in our world may be revealed and all the world may be healed. When we break down dividing walls, we become instruments of peace.

And so, like the person who was born blind, maybe we don’t need to know everything. In fact, when the authorities question him again and again, his answer is so simple: “One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.”

That is the beginning of working the works of God.

Not having every answer.

Not hiding in fear.

Not proving that we are right.

Just telling the truth about what God has done. Amen.

Note 1: <https://unfoldinglight.net/2026/03/11/you-know/>