

“Who’s On First?”

John 9:1-41

Union Congregational UCC, Green Bay, WI

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Today’s story has a lot of twists and turns. To some of us, it sounds like a Biblical version of the comedy sketch “Who’s on First?” We seem to have lots of confusion and denial over the words of a formerly blind man. Could it be an ancient sketch with impeccable timing or a tragic tale of grasping for righteousness when clearly we’re wrong.

Let’s take a look back at our sketch. Jesus walks along with various people or perhaps his disciples. They come across a blind man sitting in the road. Somehow they understand that the man had been blind at birth. One of them asks Jesus, “Here is a blind man. Who caused his blindness? Was it his own sin or that of his parents?”

To a modern-day listener, we probably gasp at this conversation in the presence of the blind person. But to an ancient citizen of Rome, nothing would have seemed out of the ordinary. Blindness was not a particularly concerning condition. The person could still speak for themselves and did not need any support from the Roman authorities. Begging was considered an appropriate profession for someone with blindness. Besides, in the ancient world, most people felt they deserved whatever physical limitations befell them.

Back to the conversation. Jesus replied that no one sinned, neither the man nor his parents. But he does say that God could use this situation to demonstrate God’s works being performed even now. He then goes on to say that while he is yet on the earth, they are to do God’s work. After he is gone, the light of the world will go away and leave darkness. A rather obscure reply to the original question.

Jesus prepares a mud poultice to remove the blindness. Note, the blind man has not asked for this. Jesus places the earthen patch on his eyes, tells him to bathe in a nearby pool. He does so; his sight returns.

So far, a miracle story – sight restored! It could end here, but the important parts are yet to come. Several onlookers point out that this man used to be a blind beggar and now he can see. Another says, “It can’t be. This guy just looks like that beggar.” The blind man would have none of it. He jumps up and claims “It’s ME!” They retort, “Tell us...just how did that happen?” The blind man tells his story to them. The onlookers just mock him, “And where is this guy now, huh?” In our skit, the blind man quips, “How should I know? I was blind.” The Bible just indicates “no answer.”

Next, the Pharisees jump in. They interrogate this suspicious man. “Just how did this happen?” they demand. The blind man tells his story again. A debate ensues; the man’s story is irrelevant.

“Wait a minute,” one claims. “It’s the sabbath; no real priest works on the sabbath. This healer is a fraud. He could no more save your sight than I could. What do you have to say to that?”

The blind man counters with “He is a prophet! How else could this have happened??”

The enraged Pharisees seek out his parents. “They’ll tell us the truth.” The parents appear before the Pharisee inquisition. “Testify before us, leaders of the temple. How is it your son can see now?”

Fearing banishment, our parent gives as little info as possible. To agree with her son's explanation would cut the family off from their world, a fate worse than blindness. She offers that he was born blind but she's not sure how he can see now. "Ask him yourselves; he's of legal age." The Pharisees hold the line. "The healer is unquestionably a sinner."

The blind man interjects, "I don't know about that. But I do know that I was blind and now I see." Can you hear the tune Amazing Grace wafting in the background?

One of the Pharisees backtracks to the original question of how it worked. The blind man exasperates, "How many times do I have to tell you? You won't listen, will you. Perhaps you should consider becoming his disciples."

"Blasphemy!" they howl. They are proud disciples of Moses who got his marching orders directly from God. "We're not taking orders from a nobody."

"Nobody?" the blind man taunts. "Let me get this straight. This guy applies a mud patch to my eyes and after a soak in a nearby pool, I can see. Don't you see?" Pun intended.

He also throws out a subtle line similar to one from Jesus' earlier in the encounter. "God does not listen to sinners, but does listen to those who worship and obey God." I detect a bit of rebellion at this point.

Losing the argument, one Pharisee throws him out of the temple. "Don't preach to us. You're the sinner here!"

Jesus steps back into the fray. He asks the blind man point blank if he believes in the Son of Man. The man replies he would if he knew who he was. Jesus identifies himself and the man worships him on the spot. Jesus then proclaims that he has come into the world to give sight to those who cannot see. He follows with giving blindness to those who can see.

The Pharisees pick up on that last line. "Of course, he's not referring to us."

Jesus finishes with "If you were blind, your sin could be forgiven. But your current sight proves you are a sinner." Wow, a decisive rebuke!!

Just reviewing this passage is exhausting and dense. There are so many issues in 41 verses that it's hard to know where to begin. We could say that it's a treatise on disability and another opportunity to perform a miracle.

But it is much more than that. It's all about "othering" – finding ways to set up walls between people. The blindness works as a great metaphor for seeing and knowing. And who can see in spite of physical limitations.

This year, the Lenten readings come mostly from John. John emphasizes the identity of Jesus and what that means to us followers. We've heard the story of Nicodemus wondering about being born again. Two weeks ago the woman at the well who suddenly recognizes Jesus as a prophet. Today it is the blind man who also recognizes Jesus' divinity. In all three, Jesus reaches out to the social outcast, to validate them as God's beloved.

No one would believe the blind man's story. The onlookers could not decide if they recognized him or not. The Pharisees could not fathom that such an event could even occur. When confronted, they held on tight

to beliefs established millennia ago. Even the mother was not quite so sure about the actual event, but chose not to upset the Pharisees for fear of social exile. That would have been the ultimate “othering” punishment.

Yet the blind man risked everything. Undoubtedly now banished from the temple, if not already by virtue of his blindness. He chose to believe Jesus, acting as a newfound disciple, in the presence of those who had kicked off this entire story looking for fault – probably disciples of Jesus.

As ever, we cannot place this conflict at the feet of the Jewish believers. This is a story about authority; the Pharisees had genuine concerns over theology, but they also feared rocking the boat with Rome. I would surmise they wielded very healthy egos, secure in their self-centered righteousness. It was much easier to “other” those attracted to Jesus’ message and cut them off from society. They could rest comfortably in their spiritual and political power.

Jesus knows his demise is quickly approaching. There is little time to teach about his being the light of the world to those who can see. Rather than major displays of miracles, he still meets us to demonstrate the kingdom at hand: a Pharisee seeking his counsel in the middle of the night, an outcast woman coming to the well when others are not around, a blind man begging at the side of a road.

Where does that leave us? It’s a great story, whether actual or not. It does challenge us to look back to see people we may have othered in our paths. When have we discounted others, simply because we could not imagine their truth? When have we insisted on being right instead of offering mercy and fellowship? When have we held up a yard stick for perfection, when we ourselves could scarcely measure up?

In ancient Roman times, everyday citizens ostracized the other. Babies born with visible disabilities were drowned in local rivers or simply left on the curb to die, weeded out as potentially unproductive members of society. Some became slaves or even pets for the elite, purchased at local “monster markets.” Considered less than human, these “others” deserved the jeering and humiliation at the hands of their owners.

While we may cringe at thoughts of a monster market, have we done something similar? Here are some examples going on today: the constant purge of those with darker skin, eliminating support programs for health and special needs here and abroad, providing no-cost health insurance for the poor even though the deductibles may exceed \$30,000 per year.

We must ask ourselves when we’ve supported systemic othering. I now see commercials on TV supporting deportation of “dangerous others.” Our leaders report “bombing the crap out” of citizens in other countries as acceptable collateral damage. We look away when our administration colonizes lands that surrender ill-gained resources.

Perhaps we can forgive those who’ve othered us. We’ve all been there – dismissed when we disagree with others; lampooned for suggesting imaginative but untested theories; belittled for supporting unpopular causes. But more important, perhaps we can muster enough mercy for the “othered.” May the spirit who stands with us encourage us to love those on the edge, outside of their community, languishing in darkness.

Perhaps this story promoting belief in Jesus and the kingdom best suits us as we rely on the assurances of Psalm 23. The psalm promises divine presence in life’s challenges: abundance, peace, a path to follow in good times and bad, enemies becoming companions, goodness, mercy and a forever home. Let us extend

our mercy too – sharing abundance, offering peace, journeying with others on their life paths, bringing goodness, mercy and a refuge for others.

Will we only believe the truth of this story if Jesus himself steps into our realm to teach us? Or will we see Jesus, our loving God or the ever present spirit in the form of our friends, parents, teachers or even the local police, acknowledging our needs and providing comfort. As we will soon sing,

“May the Sending One Defend You, May the Seeking One amend you.
May the Keeping One befriend you, in your gladness and your grieving.”

Resources

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- John 9:1-41, pp. 164-165.

Wikipedia Search: Disability in Ancient Rome, 3/1/2026.

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Disability_in_ancient_Rome

Wikipedia Search: “Who’s on First?”, 3/1/2026.

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In the Lectionary - Acknowledgment (John 9:1-41)

"You can't be born again," I said, "you're a Lutheran. You are the chairman of the board of trustees."

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Source: <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2012-01/acknowledgment>