

**Oak Grove Presbyterian Church**  
**Rev. Dr. Bart Roush**  
**March 19, 2023**  
**John 9:1–38**

Let us pray for an awareness of and inspiration from God’s Spirit.

Open our eyes God, to the wonders and signs around us. Open our eyes God to your presence in these words. Move us to sight and to belief. In seeing you, that we may proclaim your goodness and follow in your ways. Amen.

**John 9:1-38**

As Jesus walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him 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 he 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 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. So they said again to the blind man, “What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.” He said, “He is a prophet.”

The Jews 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 Jews; for the Jews 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 man who had been blind, and they said to him, “Give glory to God! We know that this man 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 man, we do not know where he comes from." The man answered, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man 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 Son of Man?" 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 him.

When my oldest niece Lauren, who is now a grown woman with her own child, was about 7 or 8-years-old, she was sitting at the table with her family having dinner. During the regular dinner conversation, my niece said a curse word. This 7- or 8-year-old, in the midst of casual conversation, dropped a big curse word. The one that leads to an "R" rating for films. My sister and brother-in-law, being the good parents they are, tried not to overreact. They looked at one another, my brother-in-law nodded to my sister, as if to say "nope, not me, you handle it." My sister took a brief pause, and then she said, "Lauren, where did you hear that word?" Lauren looked at her parents and forthrightly declared, "I don't know, but it wasn't at Vanessa's house!"

Vanessa was Lauren's friend from up the street who had teenage brothers. Mystery solved. While Lauren was trying her best as a 7-year-old to not take the blame for something, and also deflect the blame from her friend, that's not always true for adults, we often seek to assign blame, or we don't accept it when we should accept it, or at worst, we deflect blame off ourselves and onto others.

Our story today starts with the disciples, asking a question about blame and sin. Upon seeing a man who is blind, the disciples pose a question to Jesus. "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" It's a question to our modern ears that is objectionable because of the presumption that a deformity or handicap or some misfortune is somehow linked with sin, and in this case, even parental sin. It was a belief in Jesus' day that was common, and thankfully not so common today.

When Jesus is asked the question by his disciples, he refuses to accept the premise of the question, the presumption of sin as the cause of blindness. Jesus answers, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him 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." There is no correlation between the man's condition and sinfulness. As one author says, "God does not make people sick in order to punish them for wrongdoing. To step away from our brother or sister's suffering because we assume it's divinely ordained, is *not* righteous. It's reprehensible."<sup>i</sup>

Upon seeing the man born blind, Jesus kneels down, grabs some dirt, spits on it to make mud, places it on the man's eyes and instructs him to wash it off. When the man does this, his sight is restored. Jesus and the disciples then disappear for almost the rest of the story.

Once the man born blind is healed, his neighbors begin to debate if it is really him. Presumably the people that have known this man for years cannot recognize him, it's as if they have never really looked at him. When he tells him, even though he is his healed and whole, they still cannot believe him.

The next scene in the story shows the man born blind and now healed brought before the religious authorities. The Pharisees get into a technical argument because Jesus healed on the sabbath. Jesus mixed dirt with water, which is considered work, and expressly is forbidden by the rules for the sabbath. When the religious authorities ask the man what he thinks of Jesus, this rulebreaker, the man declares that Jesus is a prophet. The religious authorities disbelieve the man altogether and refuse to believe he was ever blind. They discount who he is.

The scene shifts because the religious authorities call in the man's parents to verify if he was actually born blind. The parents, fearful that they may be thrown out of their church, refuse to answer the question and say the son can speak for himself.

The man who is restored is once again before the religious authorities for more questions. They ask the man to denounce Jesus as a sinner. The man simply replies, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." The authorities, not liking this answer, again ask him to recount his story. And with a great deal of bravery, and I think a healthy dose of snark and irony, the man says, "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?" The man goes on to declare that Jesus must be from God, because only someone from God would be able to heal the way Jesus did. This is simply too much for the Pharisees. They dismiss the man and say, "You were born

entirely in sin, and are you trying to teach us?” And they drive him out of the community. He is ostracized and rejected by almost everyone.

One author notes, “Not only does the community’s legalistic approach to faith prevent them from seeing the healed man; it also prevents them from seeing God’s love and power at work in their midst. No one in the story rejoices when the man is healed. *No one* – not even the man’s parents – expresses joy, or wonder, or gratitude, or awe. No one says, ‘I am so happy for you!’ or asks, ‘What is it like to see for the first time? Does the sunlight hurt your eyes? What are you excited to look at first?’”

“Instead, the community responds with contempt, its need to preserve its own sense of righteousness more important than celebrating a fellow human being’s restoration to life.”<sup>ii</sup>

According to the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), one of the largest advocacy groups for LGBTQIA+ persons, there have been over 340 anti-LGBTQ+ bills introduced into state legislatures this year, including the most anti-transgender bills ever filed that this group has ever seen.<sup>iii</sup> Some have already passed and been signed into law. Most of these bills are aimed at some of the most vulnerable people, transgender children. There are bills that prohibit students from playing school sports that match their gender identity, bills that restrict gender-affirming medical care, against the recommendations of doctors and medical associations, including the American Medical Association, the American Psychiatric Association, and the American Academy of Pediatrics. Bills that require, in effect, teachers to misgender children as they are mandated to only use pronouns that match the students sex assigned at birth unless a parent intervenes. Bills that require a school to inform a parent if the student requests to use a different pronoun or if they identify as LGBTQ at school. There are bills that ban discussion of sexual orientation or

gender identity or ban books from libraries that discuss LGBTQ+ topics. Bills that ban drag performances in public settings or require them to be in adult-only venues. There are still yet other bills that prevent doctors from referring patients under 18 to other doctors out of state if their own state bans such care. Other bills would allow so-called bounty hunter lawsuits whereby any private citizen could sue for damages against medical providers for violating the proposed laws. There are bills that would criminalize medical professionals and parents. Outside of these bills, in Texas, there have been child-abuse investigations opened against parents seeking medically necessary care for their children.

Even before this new and unprecedented wave of anti-LGBTQ+ bills, we knew that LGBTQ youth were vulnerable. There are more instances of self-harm, or suicidal thought for these youth. There are harmful experiences from bullying, online harassment, threat of or actual physical assault. With these new bills being proposed, according to a recent study from the Trevor Project,<sup>iv</sup> the instances of harm or lack of feeling safe have only increased. These bills are doing real harm. Some of the most vulnerable children will die because of these bills.

Good people are fighting against these bills. And in several other states, including Minnesota, there are bills proposed to protect children and their families who seek gender affirming care, even if they come from other states. Minnesota is also working on a bill to ban so-called conversion therapy for LGBTQ youth, it has passed the house, and is awaiting debate in the Senate.

I'm not entirely certain why these anti-LGBTQ bills are being enacted, or why they have increased so much. They certainly aren't based in fact. We know that when youth receive the care they need, when they are believed and supported in who they are, instances of self-harm and suicidal thoughts are considerably diminished. Those that have drafted

or support such bills use misinformation, outright lies, and fear to gather support. These bills are not based in any reality of what it is to be transgender or what highly individualized and carefully monitored psychological and medical treatment actually looks like.<sup>v</sup>

And maybe that is the root of all of it, fear. A fear of the unknown. A fear of someone that can be labeled the other. The fear of maybe something in yourself that you have been taught is shameful. A drag performer, whose livelihood is now potentially threatened because of legislation passed in Tennessee, was recently interviewed on the program *Fresh Air*, and said, “It causes a lot of big feelings when you see someone love in themselves something that you hate in yourself. I think when you see someone else who is proud of a part of themselves that you have been taught to be ashamed of, that causes people to lash out.”<sup>vi</sup>

Fear is powerful. Fear can drive away compassion, and empathy. It can drive away kindness and understanding. It can drive away reason and common sense. “If we talk about gender and sexuality, it might turn my kid into something they aren’t.”

“If the man’s blindness *isn’t* a punishment for sin, then what does that mean about how the world works? *Anyone* might get sick, or suffer from a disability, or face years of undeserved pain and suffering for no discernible reason whatsoever. That wouldn’t be fair, would it? That would be a version of reality the good religious folks can’t control. A terrifying, destabilizing version. Who among us can bear to surrender the illusion of control?”<sup>vii</sup>

I mentioned that almost everyone ostracizes and rejects the man born blind and who has been made whole. He was never really part of the community to begin with, he wasn’t seen, his humanity overlooked, and when he tries to tell them who he is when he is restored, when he is

made whole, they don't believe him, they don't know how to see him differently than who he was before, and he is sent away when he doesn't conform to what the community expects.

Author and Franciscan priest Richard Rohr, writes, "Jesus tried to change people by loving them and healing them. His harshest words of judgement were reserved for those who perpetuated systems of inequality and oppression and who, through religion itself, thought they were sinless and untouchable."<sup>viii</sup>

Almost everyone rejects the man. But Jesus returns in the last scene of our story. When Jesus heard that the man whose sight was restored is driven out of the community, Jesus went searching for him. Jesus sought the one that all the others rejected. Love casts out fear. Love searches for those that others despise and reject. When Jesus finds him, only after all of what the man has been through, does Jesus ask him if he believes. The man recognizes Jesus for who he is and worships him. There are no prerequisites before Jesus sees the man as a human; before Jesus makes him whole. There is no requirement for perfection, or correct behavior, or righteous belief for Jesus. With Jesus there is love and being made new, made whole.

May we choose love. May we seek out those that others reject. May we worship the one who kneels in the dirt and gets his hands dirty to make us whole. May we be the ones to get dirty and work for a world that is different. May we rejoice when someone is made whole. May we be open so that "when new life appears in whatever surprising guise God chooses, we will embrace, cherish, celebrate, and share the good news, too."<sup>ix</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Debi Thomas, <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2570-now-i-see>

<sup>ii</sup> Debi Thomas, *ibid.*

<sup>iii</sup> [https://19thnews.org/2023/02/2023-anti-trans-lgbtq-bills-record/?amp&fbclid=IwAR0Yd\\_zx19J5mAR-YAvsJpTrAbkFubNhkOhHt7Op8sadEfe39FhEu34vrQ8](https://19thnews.org/2023/02/2023-anti-trans-lgbtq-bills-record/?amp&fbclid=IwAR0Yd_zx19J5mAR-YAvsJpTrAbkFubNhkOhHt7Op8sadEfe39FhEu34vrQ8)

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/blog/new-poll-emphasizes-negative-impacts-of-anti-lgbtq-policies-on-lgbtq-youth/>

<sup>v</sup> [https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2023/02/20/gender-affirming-care-books-gender-identity-targeted-gop/11282562002/?fbclid=IwAR0AvG4mwj6cRU\\_Id9\\_qdjfg\\_KrkTNeBaaL3gOzgtSLF7zjZHTT\\_5VEgR3Q](https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2023/02/20/gender-affirming-care-books-gender-identity-targeted-gop/11282562002/?fbclid=IwAR0AvG4mwj6cRU_Id9_qdjfg_KrkTNeBaaL3gOzgtSLF7zjZHTT_5VEgR3Q)

<sup>vi</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2023/03/16/1163815547/tennessee-drag-law-queen-bella-duballe>

<sup>vii</sup> Debi Thomas, *ibid.*

<sup>viii</sup> <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/inner-transformation-2019-01-02/>

<sup>ix</sup> Debi Thomas, *ibid.*