



The Lessons We Learn from the People We Meet

Along the Way

The Man Born Blind

John 9:1-41

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Is change really possible? This extraordinary long passage, which you and Lucy have just read together, brings up a whole host of concepts and concerns, but at the end of 41 verses, I think everything points back to that question in one way or another. Is change really possible? Can people really change? Can institutions really change? Can families really change? Can life as we know it really change? And if it can — how will we respond to it?

It starts with Jesus and his disciples walking along on what turns out to be the Sabbath day. They see a man who had been born blind, and the question comes. “Who sinned? This man, or his parents? There has to be some reason, some explanation, for why he was born this way. So which is it?” That way of thinking — that everything that happens to us in life happens because we either had enough faith or too little faith or because we either avoided sin or committed sin — today we call that the prosperity gospel. If you are faithful, good things happen. And if good things happen, that means you are faithful enough. If you are bad, bad things happen. And if bad things happen, that means you were not faithful enough.

So maybe it was the man. But if it was the man’s sin, and he was born this way, then he must have sinned before he was born, or it must be that God knew he would sin later and God punished him ahead of schedule. But that does not sound like God, does it? So it had to be his parents’ sin. But causing a baby to be blind because the parents have sinned, well, that doesn’t sound like God either. The prosperity gospel might seem appealing in the abstract, especially for having a ready explanation for everything, but when applied to individual situations, it points to a very different God than the one we know and serve, a very different God than the one revealed throughout the whole biblical witness.

That is why Jesus doesn’t hesitate in responding, “This isn’t about sin at all. He didn’t sin and his parents didn’t sin.” He follows that up with words that sound harsh to our ears in the NRSV translation: “He was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me...” Now if you’re thinking that doesn’t sound much like God either, you’re not alone. God does not cause bad things to happen just so God can then appear to be a hero. Every once in awhile I wonder what on earth the NRSV translators were thinking, and this is one of those times. “He was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed...” is not just theologically problematic, it’s grammatically problematic, because it inserts words in English that never appear in the Greek. If you read it in Greek, it goes like this: “Neither this man nor his parents sinned. In order that God’s works might be revealed in all of this, we must work the works of him who sent me.” In other words — “This was not caused by sin. So let’s get on with doing God’s work.” That’s a little detour from the main point, but it’s an important one, since it influences what we know about God and how God interacts with us.

But back to the main story. After making it clear that this is not about sin, Jesus then, without prompting, spits on the ground, makes mud out of the dirt, and smears it on the man’s eyes. The man washes it off, as directed, and lo and behold, he can see. It’s an amazing miracle wrapped in fantastic theology, which typically would be enough for us to wrap this up with a hymn and a prayer and be on our way to lunch. But all of that happens in seven verses, and this story is 41. What happens for the next 34 verses? Jesus actually

fades into the background for most of it, as the community around the man, including his neighbors, his parents, and the authorities, all struggle to make sense of it. Something has changed and they are not sure they like it, in fact, they are pretty sure they don't like it at all. It turns out that being unsettled by change is a longstanding human habit.

The man's neighbors? They look out the windows, and start asking one another, "Is that the blind man? It looks like him." "Well, it might look like him, but it can't possibly be him. He's just walking around without any assistance. Maybe it's his brother." "No, his older brother is much taller, and the younger brother is, too. I think it's him." "Well, look, he's not even tripping over anything. The blind man has never walked this well. It's someone else. Maybe other family members are in town visiting." It never enters their minds that it was the blind man, who is now a changed man.¹ Instead, they reach for any other possible explanation. I get that. I do it all the time. We all do. We like to make sense of the world around us. We like to understand, because understanding makes us feel like we have some control over what happens. His neighbors, still trying to sort it all out, take him to the Pharisees, who badger the man for information, for an explanation, or for him to at least agree that what happened, shouldn't have. They bug him and insult him and belittle him until he leaves the area entirely, and don't forget that somewhere in there, even the man's parents leave him out to dry. The Pharisees ask them for their take on everything, and all they can muster is, "Look, this is our son. He was born blind. We don't know what's going on now, and we had nothing to do with it. Ask him — these are his questions! He's old enough!"

No wonder the man left. Absolutely no one was on his side. And that's a terrible place to be. A terrible way to feel. Especially when you've done nothing to deserve it. Because not only was this man's blindness not his fault, he also never asked for everything that followed. Did you notice that? Every other time Jesus heals someone, it is in response to a request. This guy here in John chapter 9 didn't ask to be healed. He was just minding his own business, and suddenly everything was different. Jesus comes to town and shakes up everything and no one really knows what to do about it. No one knows what it will mean for each of them, but you can bet they're worried about it. It's change on every level: Individual. Communal. Familial. Institutional. It's a lot. So the neighbors dismiss him. The Pharisees challenge him. And his parents deny him.

Isn't that how we often react to change? Some of us just ignore the fact that anything is different, and carry on like we always have. Some of us get stubborn and belligerent and push back against it. And some of us throw our hands up in the air and say, "Hey, hey, I don't know what that's all about, but I had nothing to do with it." More often than not, we will do whatever it takes to restore the equilibrium around us. And that can be good. That can be life-saving in any number of circumstances. But change, when it is of God and from God, change is not life-saving, it is life-transforming. And that is what the Gospel is all about. It's not about being saved. It's about being transformed.

I've thought long and hard about sharing this story with you. I've gone back and forth about it, in part because it is only partially my story. And so I am telling it in a somewhat veiled way, and I ask you to hold it gently, because I think it does illumine this story.

One day I was scrolling through social media in a fairly absent-minded way as I waited in line for something — I don't remember what, or where. But in glancing down, I saw that one of my family members had changed their photo and their gender on their profile. My immediate response was something elegant and eloquent, like this: "Whoa." Most of you know that I serve on the Board of Directors for the Covenant Network, an organization in the Presbyterian Church that advocates for and celebrates the full inclusion of all persons into the church, including those who identify as LGBTQ. So you would think I would have received that information about my family member with relative ease. That is not necessarily how I would classify my reaction. A million questions flooded into my brain. Will they be safe? Will they be accepted? How have other people responded to this? Do they have enough support? Have they been able to talk to anyone about this? What will this mean for them? And then — I'm not proud of this one — I thought, Are they sure?

I was so taken aback that I stepped out of line for whatever I had been waiting for, and I made a phone call, standing out in a parking lot, and I said something else eloquent and elegant, like, "Hey, so, um, I saw something on Facebook, and I, um, well, I'm wondering..." and this person interrupted and said, "Why don't I talk for a minute or two," and then proceeded to tell me how it was for them. And as I listened, I realized something instantly: I'm never going to understand this fully. I can never understand this the exact same way my family member does. And I don't have to actually have to. I don't have to understand at that same level in order to accept them wholeheartedly and support them unwaveringly and love them unconditionally and stand up for them unceasingly. In this way, I was transformed. I was transformed from thinking about all the angles and having no idea how this was going to go, to realizing that in all the ways that mattered most, I didn't need the answer to any questions. Don't get me wrong — I want to understand, as much as I can — and I hope and pray I will grow in understanding. But standing alongside my family member is not predicated upon my understanding. And even in this, I find assurance in this story from John's gospel.

While everyone else around him scrambles to make sense of what's happened, the man himself simply says again and again, "Here's what I know. I was blind. Now I see." He tells how it is for him. And along the way, he who was changed once, is changed again. Y'all gave voice to it. Did you hear it? The man changes, not just in his eyesight, but in his capacity to see who Jesus really is. In verse 11, he calls him, "The man called Jesus." In verse 12, "I don't know." By verse 17, he says, "He is a prophet." Verse 25, "I don't know whether he is a sinner. What I know is I was blind, and now I see." In verse 33 he says, "If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." And then finally, in verse 38, the man declares, "I believe."

Change can be disorienting, even for the one around whom it centers. It upends a whole system. And even when change happens quickly — in the blink of an eye, or the ring of a phone — our understanding of that change can take much longer. But if this story is to be trusted, **it will come**.

And don't forget the end of the story. When the man has been run out of town, Jesus finds him. It's right there in verse 35. Jesus finds him yet again. That's how the story so often ends, isn't it? The disciples are found on the beach and called. The lost sheep is found and welcomed back. The lost coin is found and celebrated. The lost son is found and embraced. Enough bread is found and feasted upon. The man who had been blind is found again. We are always being found.

So when change comes into your life — and it will; I don't know what it will look like or when it will come, but it will — when change comes into your life, no matter how disheveled and upside down it may make you feel, remember you know how the story ends. Wherever you may be as everything swirls around you, Jesus will find you. Change is hard, but you won't ever be left behind.

¹ The idea of a hypothetical conversation between neighbors comes from Fred Craddock's sermon, "Wanting But Not Wanting the Blessing."