

“Unfinished Healings.”

John 9:1-41
Fourth Sunday in Lent

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Christ the King Lutheran Church
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Note: *In preparation for this sermon, I met with Alicia Howard, who has allowed me to share portions of that discussion, including some video clips of our conversation.*

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound / That saved a wretch like me.

I once was lost, but now am found / Was blind, but now I see.”

Practically since it first appeared on the scene, survey after survey has shown this song consistently at the top of most lists of all-time favorite hymns or church songs. This is particularly true in the US, but also in other English-speaking countries in the world, as well as many non-English-speaking church communities who have translated it into their own language. I'm told that it often is the ONLY overlap in top ten hymns in surveys of historically African-American and historically white congregations, and also frequently the only such overlap in surveys taken among those who self-identify as preferring so-called traditional and so-called contemporary worship styles.

Many of us know the back story—that it was written by John Newton, who earlier in his life had been involved in the Atlantic slave trade as a member of the British Royal Navy, then after a religious conversion became an Anglican priest and later a vocal and active abolitionist, daring to bring politics into the pulpit as he openly preached against slavery, and later daring to speak truth to power in his testimonies before parliament. That back-story is so well known, in fact, that many of us—myself included—have missed the detail that the well-known last line of the first verse of Amazing Grace comes almost word for word from today's gospel reading—verse 25, in case you missed it—when the man who has been healed by Jesus and is being questioned by the Pharisees says, quite simply, “All I know is, I once was blind, but now I see.”

These words coming from the mouth of the man-born-blind, who has been healed, likely helped frame John Newton's first person narrative in the first verse: working backwards from this bible verse, “I was blind but now I see,” he transformed the father's line from the prodigal son story into the first person as well, “I was lost by now I'm found,” and then added the line that he, a wretched sinner, had been saved by this amazing grace.

This is actually a pretty deep song theologically, a fact that is often masked by its simplicity. But a couple of weeks ago, I started thinking first of how powerful the list of

opposites in this song were: the wretched is now saved, the lost is now found, the blind can now see. And then, as I began prepping to preach on this text, the healing of the man-born-blind, I wondered about this list, and how in this beloved hymn, as well as in the bible story it takes at least some of its images from being blind is equated with being lost, with being a wretched sinner. And even though Jesus turns this image on its head—the man-born-blind can now see, while it is the Pharisees who can't see—still, I wondered about the very idea of blindness being considered a synonym for ignorance, cluelessness, lost-ness, unsaved-ness. I thought about this in particular two weeks ago, as a young woman used a white cane to make her way up here and beautifully sing for us and to God, "I could sing of your love forever." What might this young woman think, what might she feel, how might she respond to Jesus healing a man born blind, especially since Jesus himself seems to talk about blindness as a metaphor for a spiritual problem, of being oblivious to God's will, God's grace, God's mercy. So I spoke with Alicia Howard last week about this; unfortunately, she wasn't able to be with us here this morning, but she did give me permission to share parts of her story in this sermon, including a few thoughts we captured on video. How does she react to these stories—can she find herself in the story of Jesus healing the man-born-blind?

Video Clip 1: "My reaction to those healing stories [in the Bible] is that they are very remarkable, they are amazing, they are amazing to hear ... they are amazing to relate to them. But I really don't see my story as being one of those [healing stories]"

She doesn't really see her story as being one of those healing stories. Alicia shared with me, first of all, that she identifies as being visually impaired, not blind. This is an important distinction for a number of reasons—scale or degree being one of them, but perhaps even more important is the fact that Alicia gets to speak for herself in terms of how she wants to be known—or not—in terms of her visual ability. This was not a dignity offered to the man born blind—people talked about him, wondered whether his blindness was a result of his sin or his parents, which Alicia and I joked about as we were discussing this story, imagining the man born blind sitting there while the disciples discussed the cause of his blindness, maybe even shouting out to them, "hey, hello, I'm right here the one you're taking about. I'm blind, not deaf. Why don't you talk TO me, not just ABOUT me?"

To be fair, the narrator in John's gospel talks about the person as the man-born-blind, rather than the blind man, a subtle distinction, to be sure, but one that allows for his blindness to be one characteristic among many, rather than the thing that defines him. Still, the disciples waste no time in wondering aloud with Jesus whose sin caused his blindness—not whether his blindness was caused by sin, but rather whose sin in particular. They assumed it had to be someone's sin that caused it, after all.

Clip Two: "I don't believe that blindness has anything to do with any punishment for a certain sin or with being a sinner. I believe that it's actually a gift in some ways. Because, in my opinion, and the way I see it in my story, it was a way of God sort of letting me know that there are other perspectives. You can use.... The way that I describe it is that 'I can see with my heart, rather than my eyes.'"

To see with one's heart rather than one's eyes. Here, it seems that Alicia's experience and Jesus' words truly resonate. Jesus, especially the side of Jesus we see most in the gospel of John, tends to reimagine and redefine terms, images, and concepts that have long been taken for granted. He's not blind because of sin; his blindness exists in order to allow God's will to be done, God's spirit to be experienced, God's presence to be revealed. Physical blindness is not the issue here for Jesus; he's concerned about spiritual blindness, that which would keep us from seeing God, experiencing God, knowing God moving among us. Seeing is not entitlement, contrary to the thoughts of the privileged Pharisees. Jesus, like Alicia, speaks of a seeing that comes from the heart, not from through the eyes. With this understanding, even the blind can see God in action, even those who have been the objects of people's pity, the objects of the Pharisee's scorn, the objects of the disciples' inquiry over the nature of their sin, even such as these can be witnesses to God's light and truth, can be ministers of the good news of Christ's love in action

Clip three: "When I first heard the story especially, I really have taken a love to it. And it's not necessarily just because there is someone blind in the story, it's more of.... Yes, Jesus healed the blind man—or, excuse me, the man who has been born blind—but he also kind of also made the Pharisees see what it means to be healed, what it actually means to be ministered to."

Who actually gets healed in this story? Sure, the man born blind receives his sight, no small thing there, a wondrous sign, as John's gospel would say, a miracle, we might add today. But while this is perhaps the most obvious healing in the story, it is certainly not the only one. In addition to him receiving his sight, the disciples are healed of their notion of differing abilities being directly caused by either the sin of the person in question or that of their parents, beginning to erase the stigma attached to such differences. Might also the Pharisees be healed from their sense of being God's in-crowd, God's favored ones, transformed from their idea that their traditions were somehow more important, more holy, more sacred than God's actual work being performed in their midst? Could we hope, at very least, that the seeds were planted for such healing, such a transformation?

Beyond Jesus clearly being a bit of a rebel in all this—healing on the Sabbath, cleansing with spit and dirt, talking smack to the would-be religious authorities, the man-born-blind is also a hero in this story. He went from being a passive object of people's pity to being a willing recipient of Jesus' grace, to being an eager messenger of God's mercy and love.

Clip four: "I definitely do see the person born blind as a hero, because he really showed what it was to, not only be thankful for what Jesus did and for how he healed him, but he really showed what it was to actually genuinely be *blessed* by the whole thing."

See, here's the thing about the kingdom of God we continue to proclaim. Things are different. Jesus breaks the rules in order to do God's will. The healed are not just grateful, they are blessed. Mud clarifies. The blind see. The ministered-to become ministers to others. The privileged reconsider their status. And we, who were once all darkness, now in the Lord are light. Let us live, therefore, one and all, as children of light. AMEN.