

¹As [Jesus] walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. ²His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” ³Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. ⁴We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. ⁵As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” ⁶When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes, ⁷saying to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see.

⁸The 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?” ⁹Some were saying, “It is he.” Others were saying, “No, but it is someone like him.” He kept saying, “I am the man.” ¹⁰But they kept asking him, “Then how were your eyes opened?” ¹¹He 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.” ¹²They said to him, “Where is he?” He said, “I do not know.”

¹³They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. ¹⁴Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. ¹⁵Then 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.” ¹⁶Some 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.

²⁴So 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.” ²⁵He answered, “I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.” ²⁶They said to him, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?” ²⁷He 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?” ²⁸Then they reviled him, saying, “You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. ²⁹We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.” ³⁰The man answered, “Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. ³¹We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. ³²Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. ³³If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.” ³⁴They answered him, “You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?” And they drove him out.

³⁵Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” ³⁶He answered, “And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.” ³⁷Jesus said to him, “You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.” ³⁸He said, “Lord, I believe.” And he worshiped him.

The gospel of John doesn't label events as “miracles.” Instead, certain key events in the gospel are labeled as “signs,” which is John's way of saying that this event reveals a deeper meaning about Jesus' identity. Depending on how you count them, there are either 6 or 7 total signs in John's gospel. The composition is unclear whether the walking on water and the feeding the 5,000 are supposed to be two separate signs or should be seen as one sign. For now, let's just say they are separate, so we have seven total. Today's gospel lesson is John's penultimate 6th sign, and next Sunday's gospel lesson is the seventh.

Today's sign is completed in the first seven verses of the story. To be completely honest, I wish the passage ended there. Because after those seven verses, the narrative continues on for another 34 verses, within which there are 28 straight verses where Jesus doesn't make an appearance. If you don't count the birth narratives, this story today has the longest stretch in any of the gospels where Jesus is absent. The bulk of these non-Jesus verses are of the man-now-healed having a debate with his neighbors, then a debate with some Pharisees, then his parents are interviewed by the Pharisees, and finally the man debates with the Pharisees a second time. That whole section points toward a confrontation between Christianity and Judaism, and I'll get to that in a minute. But let me say now that the whole narrative was the prescribed reading for today, but I shortened it to get us through it faster. So even if you don't like my sermon today, I'd like to think that you would thank me for saving you from standing through the whole thing. – “You're welcome.” – However, maybe you are of the opinion that we should have read the whole narrative, and in addition maybe you won't like this sermon. In that case, I hope you liked the children's sermon. – “You're welcome.” –

Alright, the point of the whole narrative is to point us to “the sign,” so let's focus on that for a moment. A man was born blind, and Jesus' disciples ask whose sin caused this blindness: the man or the parents. Jesus responds that neither sinned. Rather, the man “was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.” First off, no one should think that a disability is a divine punishment of some sort. So I'm glad Jesus said neither the man nor his parents committed a sin

that resulted in his blindness. His follow-up comment – that this particular man was born blind so that God’s work can be revealed – opens the door to possible misinterpretations or misapplications of the comment. So, let me say it again as a reminder: a disability or ailment is never a punishment that God inflicts on people. Likewise, having no disability shouldn’t be interpreted as an indicator of God’s favor. The point of his comment is that a sign is about to happen, and that sign reveals something about Jesus, not about the man. John’s gospel is full of symbolism, so keep that in mind when we hear Jesus say in verses 4 and 5, “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.” — Night / Day — Dark / Light — Blind / Sight — John is using this dualistic language to point to the deeper truth that Jesus is the light of the world. This particular sign is the fulfillment of what was first mentioned in John’s Prologue in Chapter 1: he is the light that brings life to all creation. But did you notice his peculiar use of the plural? “We must work the works of him who sent me...” instead of “I must work the works of him who sent me...” Make a mental note of that, because I’ll come back to it.

As I said earlier, I kind of wish that John had stopped writing at this point, to be honest with you. The man receives his sight, and that is it. We could call it a day. Instead, John gives us a lengthy narrative, and because it gets a little thorny we need to unpack it. First of all, we need to recognize that even this narrative uses symbolism. Clearly there is the story of the man having a debate with his neighbors, with some Pharisees, and his own parents do not back him up. But that story is told in a way to symbolize what John’s own community was experiencing. John was writing this gospel somewhere around 90 and 100 CE. By that time, the Christians were discovering that not everyone could accept this message the Christians were sharing. The neighbors in the story symbolize that experience. After the Romans destroyed the Temple in 70 CE, there were only two sects of Judaism that survived: this new Christian sect and the sect of the Pharisees, which focused on dialogue and teaching a Jewish way of life. There was an escalating debate between these two sects about the proper path forward. The fact that the Christian sect was becoming more Gentile in its composition was not helping to resolve the conflict. That reality is symbolized by the escalating confrontation between the man and the Pharisees. Finally, regardless of whether these Christians were Jewish or Gentile in origin, many of these Christians were effectively not backed-up by their parents or close friends. They were left to fend for their new faith, which is symbolized by the parents in the story.

So when John tells this narrative of the healed-man, hear also what John is saying to his Christian community: “This healed-man is like you. He once was blind, like you, but he came to see Jesus as the light of the world, like you do. The challenges that you face with others, he faced as well. In the end, Jesus quietly encounters the man, just as Jesus has quiet encounters with you.” The whole narrative is meant to be reassurance to carry the community through its challenges.

So when we read this narrative, we should try to hear that message of reassurance as well. Times have changed, though, and since you and I don’t need reassurance exactly like John’s community did, we might miss that message. For instance, in our society today, there is not much of a social cost to being a Christian. What I mean by that is that none of us have likely been disparaged by our neighbors for being a Christian. It is likely that none of our parents have disowned us for being a Christian. And that is fine. However, missing that message of reassurance, too often Christians will have takeaways from this story that were not originally intended. For instance, today’s gospel should not lead us to conclude that we should make enemies out of Jews from the past or the present. Sadly, that misapplication of the text too often has been – and still is – the case. Nor should Christians feel compelled to label any other group of people as enemies. You and I don’t have to pretend to be persecuted in order to make scripture relevant to our lives. If we must have enemies in order to make our commitment to God worthwhile, then we are doing it wrong. That is not our calling. Our calling is to gather together to hear and to be fed by the good news that Jesus is the light of the world who gives life to all creation. Period. That good news carries us through our good days and our bad days. That good news directs us in our mission to be people who – in word and deed – reflect the light so that others around us can encounter God in the world.

I pointed out how Jesus makes a peculiar use of the plural when he says, “We must work the works of him who sent me...” This is Jesus telling Christians throughout the ages – in John’s community, in our community – that he isn’t the only one who reveals that he is the light of the world. We are a part of that work as well. We reveal that light through our lives. Not everyone is going to get on board with the good news we profess, and that’s fine. Like the man who came to see, we’ve come to know Jesus as the light of the world who gives life to all creation. That message shapes who we are and the values to hold dear, and like he did with the man who came to see, Jesus will keep having quiet encounters with us to give us reassurance for whatever we may face in life.

Amen.