

## **Progressive Clarity**

March 19, 2023

John 9:1-41

“Hindsight is 20/20.” This is a phrase that we all know, and that I would invite you all to remember today and every day. In essence, this phrase tells us that clarity of a particular situation comes with time. I did not understand at the age of 10 why a family member was murdered; now, I see it as the start of my faith journey, the inspiration for my paying attention in church. I didn’t understand in grade school why I was bullied so terribly; now, I see that it caused me to become more involved in the church and to discover my calling to ministry. All of us, myself included, have our moments where our tempers flare up, we see red, but we don’t give into that animalistic temptation to be a veritable “bull in a china shop.” We take a step back, take some calming breaths, do what we have to do to calm down, and once we have calmed down, we think more clearly. We know how best to respond to whatever that upsetting situation is where civility, harmony, relationships are preserved. As much as we may want answers now, clarity is something that only comes with time, and the more time we give it, the greater clarity we have. This is no less true of the reading for today, a story where we see a few different parties with a few different levels of clarity.

For example, the first party our attention is drawn to is that of the Pharisees. These elite strictly uphold the teachings of Moses, and for this reason, these new teachings from Jesus and his followers simply cannot be. In their eyes, anyone who admits faith in the teachings of Jesus is to be thrown out of the synagogue, and Jesus’ actions only fuel their fire. The Pharisees hear that Jesus has healed on the Sabbath, and they don’t see how he can be anything but a sinner. He healed on the Sabbath, and that automatically designates him a non-believer, a heretic, and a sinner. They even say as much, only to then be lectured by the blind man. However, even though the man makes a strong point, they nonetheless throw him out. This is because their tradition holds them back, keeps them from moving forward or making any progress beyond that which has already been made. As a result, they do not see Jesus for who he truly is, his teachings for what they truly are, his followers for who they are, or this new progressive movement for what it is. In short, their blinding traditionalism keeps them from achieving any level of clarity in the situation.

On the other side of this story, though, there’s the blind man, the one the Pharisees throw out of the temple after his parents have already thrown him “under the bus” for fear of their own exile. At the beginning of the story, he cannot physically see. Then, he has mud rubbed on his eyes, washes them off, and he has physical sight. However, this sight is not what John emphasizes. Consider for a moment the progress this man makes in identifying Jesus. When he is asked by the crowds who gave him sight, he replies, “the man called Jesus.” Then, he’s brought before the Pharisees. The first time he is asked who healed him, he replies, “a prophet.” Then, the third time he is asked this question, he replies, “a man from God.” Finally, the man is approached by Jesus, and he is identified as “the Son of Man.” We see over the course of this passage the progression of how Jesus is identified from “the man called Jesus” to “the Son of Man,” almost as if, during his discussion with the crowd and the Pharisees, this man’s mental sight is coming into focus as well. Over time, the truth is becoming clearer, not just that Jesus is more than just “a man,” but that the Pharisees are blinded by their traditions. This latter truth is

the reason this man is so emboldened to speak up as a pseudo-apostle against the Pharisees. So empowered by these truths, this clarity, is this man that he does something very few, if any, people would do in their wildest dreams: he speaks out against the religious elite. So, at the same time as his mind is bringing into clarity who Jesus is, this man's mind is also becoming clear on just how much the Pharisees' traditions are holding them back, how important it is to not fear those who are in power or are seeking power, and how important it is to stand up for what one believes, whether or not it matches what the powers that be say they should be.

The third party, then, that displays a certain level of blindness is the disciples. Recall that at the beginning of the story, the man is still blind, and the first thing the disciples ask Jesus is, "Who sinned? The man or his parents?" In other words, this man's blindness must be a consequence of some action or event. This "cause and effect" thought process is one we are familiar with in the modern day. If a person smokes, they risk getting lung cancer. If a person studies hard, they will have great grades. If a person doesn't wear sunblock in mid-July while working outside, they're going to get sunburned. Essentially, "every action has an equal but opposite reaction." However, this is not always the case. My mom's friend from college passed away from lung cancer 25 years ago yesterday without having smoked a single day in her life. By the same token, Katie wears plenty of sunblock, but she has still gotten skin cancer. This disconnect in our "cause and effect" thought process is the entire premise of Rabbi Harold Kushner's famous work *Why Bad Things Happen to Good People*. So it is also with the blind man. Although certain passages of Scripture designate that the offenses of the parents will be felt by the third and fourth generation of children of the offenders, this man's blindness is not because of his sinfulness, nor is it because of his parents' sinfulness. His blindness is merely a means by which God's message and identity are revealed. Think of this also in the context of the story of Doubting Thomas, coming up post-Easter. We all know the famous line from Jesus: "You believe because you have seen, but blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." This man has gone his entire life basing his beliefs of the world not on what he has seen but what he has believed. Therefore, he is not punished, but rather is blessed, a shining example of what could be for all God's children.

In the end, this is part of Lent's theme: clarity. Lent is a time to reflect, to look back at where you have been and what you've done, and to see how the Spirit has been guiding you through all of this life we live. We don't always understand why things happen the way they happen when they do happen, whether that's in regards to tragedies in our lives or where the Spirit leads us. However, with time, everyone can achieve the clarity of the blind man if they only allow the Spirit to move them towards that clarity. Therefore, I invite you all, if you haven't done so already, to take a step back during this Lenten season and ask yourselves "Where has God been in my moments of need?" and "How has God brought good out of the bad in life?"