***“Who Sinned?”*** by S. Finlan, for The First Church, March 22, 2020

**John 9:1–34**

1As he 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. . . 5As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.”

6 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.” He went and washed and came back able to see. . .

13 They brought [him] to the Pharisees. 14Now it was the sabbath. 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. 17[But] the man . . . said, “He is a prophet.”

24 For the second time they called the man, and they said . . . “that 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, “How did he open your eyes?” 27He answered . . . “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 29. . . 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. . . 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.

Like most people in those days, and like many people still to *this* day, the apostles assume that this guy’s birth defect was a punishment. Either this man sinned, or his parents must have sinned—but that is simply not true, and Jesus says so. “Neither this man nor his parents sinned” (9:3). This is an insight that has become stronger with time. Either through the growth of the scientific viewpoint or through religious maturing, people are gradually realizing that afflictions, birth defects, and diseases are not punishments from God. The rain falls on the just and the unjust (Matt 5:45). Deadly viruses strike the just and the unjust; they spread through *natural* means, and not through God’s will. We must stop assuming that diseases, earthquakes, or other natural afflictions are God’s punishing hand. These are the problems that come with the natural world and the vulnerable bodies that we have.

And yet, these things sometimes become occasions for God’s goodness, for God’s works, to be revealed. Jesus, the light of the world, uses this man’s problem to impart both healing and a revelation of truth.

I want us to notice that Jesus has the guy *do* something that involves him in his own healing. In those days there was a widespread belief in the power of a wise man’s spittle. I’m guessing this guy shares that belief, so that, when he walks to the pool of Siloam, his hope is arising; and as he washes off the clay and spittle, his expectation is at its peak. By the time he is healed, Jesus has gotten him emotionally—even spiritually—involved in his own healing.

Then, of course, the story comes to the attention of the Sanhedrin, the court of the religious authorities. They call him in and interrogate him. He’s very matter-of-fact about the healing. He’s not a sentimentalist. He’s just very straightforward and honest. The Pharisees try to tear Jesus down in his eyes, saying that he is a sinner who does not observe the Sabbath, but this doesn’t change what the guy knows. When asked what he thinks, he gives an honest answer—“He is a prophet” (9:16–17).

This flusters the Pharisees, and they call in his parents, but that doesn’t help their case, so they call the guy back again. They bark at him that Jesus is a sinner. The guy says, in effect, “I don’t know about *that*; but I *do* know that, whereas I was blind, now I see” (vv. 24–25). This starts the Pharisees’ blood boiling, and they charge on, repeating their question of how this happened. They are really starting to bully him, and it arouses the man’s ire, as well as his sarcasm. So he says, “Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?” (9:27).

Can you imagine the effect this has on the poor Pharisees? I think their heads are about to explode, and they bluster that *they* are disciples of Moses, but they don’t know about Jesus. By this time, the healed man has had enough, and he lets them have it. I’ll paraphrase. “Isn’t that odd? You guys don’t know about him, but *he’s* the one with healing power. Now you know if this man were a sinner, God would not have granted this. If he were not from God, he could do nothing.” The Pharisees can’t stand it; he’s getting under their skin. They tell the guy “you were born entirely in sins,” and they drive him out (9:28–34).

There is a blanket of irony in this story. The Pharisees are well educated, *highly* religious and devout, and yet *they* are the ones who are too blind to see. Meanwhile, a man born blind is the one who really *can* see. He can detect their fear. He sees their unfair behavior, and he’s fed up with it.

So what starts out as a lesson about how innocent people can suffer terrible afflictions, turns into a lesson about genuineness versus superficiality, and about honest character versus the cowardly bullying behavior of some powerful people. It’s fascinating how a large part of this message is communicated not by Jesus but by this ordinary fellow, and his honest reactions.Really, he carries the character of Jesus with him when he appears before the court. *He* gets to exemplify honesty and courage, while *they* embody cowardly defensiveness.

This is a great story of how Jesus includes people in his work. The gospel is not just about him. It’s about us, too. Of course, it’s about God reaching down to include us in love, and it’s about our responding to God’s reach.

Jesus speaks the call this way: “Come to me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt 11:28, NASB). If we respond to Jesus’ call, we allow all kinds of God-energy to be activated in our lives. He includes us in his family. He said “whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother” (Matt 12:50). We are invited to be members of his heavenly family, forever.