

Name: Beloved

John 9:1-12

Good Morning Church Family,

We're continuing on with our sermon series this morning about God Incarnate and our bodies. Last Sunday, we talked about how God chose to reveal Godself to us in the flesh and blood person of Jesus Christ. Jesus who was both fully God and fully Human came in human form, with a heart, lungs, blood vessels, to show to us the love that God offers. If God can choose to reveal himself to the world in a human body, we too can point our world towards God in our own bodies.

Our text for this morning tells the story of one of the occasions where Jesus healed someone physically.

Jesus and his disciples are walking through the streets of Jerusalem when they see a man sitting on the side of the road. The text doesn't tell us what the man is doing, but later on he is referred to as "the beggar", so we could assume that he is panhandling. We later learn that this man had been blind since birth, so the way he would have earned his living would have been by begging on the streets. He is likely well known in the community, and would have occupied the streets for a long time.

So, Jesus and his disciples spot this man and one of the disciples points to the man, and asks Jesus, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" What a question! That is the kind of question that a child might ask that makes a parent cringe and hush their child quickly. I remember when we lived in Warman, our Condo Building had an elevator and we'd use it every day, and Junia was a precocious, curious 3 year old. A gentleman in our building hopped into the elevator with us for the ride down to the parking garage, an unlit cigarette hanging in his mouth. Junia stared. "What's that in his mouth?", she asked me loudly. I shifted awkwardly, cleared my throat, "That's a cigarette." "WHAT'S IT FOR?" He laughed nervously, looking down at her, aha, it's a bad habit, I really should quit." And then we rode in awkward silence all the way down. It really was a slow elevator.

So, this is the kind of Question that disciples are asking. The man was blind, not deaf! He could surely hear them! Unlike me in the elevator that day, Jesus meets this question head on. "Nobody sinned!", he declares, as if to say who on earth ever gave you that idea. "But this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him." With that, Jesus, spits on the ground (such a gross, and very human thing of Jesus to do) makes mud with his spit and the dust on the grounds and tenderly wipes it over the man's eyes. He tells the man to wash in the pool of Siloam. The man did as Jesus had instructed, and he emerged, able to see for the first time in his life.

Now, I've read this story many, many times. And when Jesus explains to disciples that this man was born blind so that works of God might be displayed in him. I always

assumed that Jesus said that because he was going to perform a miracle, this man's blindness would serve the purposes of God and display his healing powers to the watching community. It feels odd to say, but I always interpreted that statement to say he was born blind, so that someday Jesus could heal him.

In my reading of "My Body is Not a Prayer Request", author Amy Kenny offers a stunning, paradigm shifting commentary on this story. She says, "It's easy to dismiss the disciples as villains here, but they surely think they are being faithful to common theology inherited from Leviticus. They aren't excluding the man for the sake of excluding, but want to remain faithful to their notions of who is in and who is out. Before you judge the disciples, you should know that a 2018 poll found that 67 percent of people feel "uncomfortable" talking to a disabled person. Disabled people make up about 25 percent of the US population, and 15 percent of the global population, yet we still make the majority of our neighbours uncomfortable, simply by existing. Anybody who doesn't fit in the tidy box of cured or "normal" makes other people feel out of place. It is no wonder the disciples don't know anything about the man other than his blindness. They don't bother to get involved in this life because they think they are better than him. Jesus is having none of it. Jesus inverts their idea of blindness by showing the disciples that disability becomes a place of encounter with the glory of God. Jesus interacts with the man directly, talking not just about him, but to him and with him. According to Jesus, the man's blindness didn't result from his or his parents' sin, but instead his blindness displays God. What a powerful, subversive: disability helps reveal the Light of the World to people who think of themselves as holier than disabled people.

Disability is no longer a symbol of it but one of being open to revelation. Disability unveils God's work to the community, if only people are willing to receive it."

Kenny makes the assertion that disability is a place where God reveals Godself and that disabled people, by nature of who they are, who God has created them to have something precious and unique to teach about the heart of God. Something that able bodied people may miss. This idea just blew me away. I, as an able bodied person, read this text and saw Jesus healing someone, making someone "normal", but Kenny a disabled person, saw the man as a prophet of sorts, both BEFORE and after his sight was restored. What a beautiful, challenging interpretation.

We see throughout the Gospels that God's heart is for those who have been cast aside, those who are on the edges of society. And what gets you cast out of a group quicker than anything? Your body -sick bodies, disabled bodies, bodies that are the 'wrong' race, elderly bodies, the list goes on a on and on. Yet those bodies, those people on the edges, have something revelatory to tell us about God.

I remember chatting with a friend from my hometown. She has 5 kids, and her middle son, Lincoln has down syndrome. She said that Lincoln, for all his wildness, loves her siblings so purely. His love doesn't come with strings or some of the push and pull that can so often be a part of life, Lincoln's love is pure. His down syndrome, his cognitive disability, allows him to offer his sort of pure love to the people in his life, a revealing of God and God's love to his community.

I recently saw a clip from an interview with Author Kate Bowler. Kate was diagnosed with stage 4 colon cancer about 10 years ago. She's now, miraculously, in full remission. But Kate said this, "When I got really sick, I started being able to see things that I just didn't see before. That is the bizarre magic of how the Holy Spirit works with Brokenness. Like, When God lists all the people who we're supposed to visit, I thought it was so that we could be extra nice to them, and it turns out like the Widow, Orphan, the Poor, whatever and it just turns out that that is where God is, so we should go there too. And I didn't know that until I was completely undone." God has made it clear that he is always on the side of the broken and the forgotten, so of course, that is where we find God. Those who are broken are a voice for truth for those of us who believe ourselves fixed.

From here, the story in John 9 gets even more interesting. The Man returns from the pool of Siloam, fully able to see for the first time in his life. He walks through the village, and his neighbours don't recognize him! This man who probably has lived in the village his whole life, as spent a fair bit of those years begging on the street is walking around and people genuinely are like, "Wait...haven't I seen this man before?" To the point the actual scripture devotes significant time to telling us about this. Remember that writing something down and recording it in the first century was very tedious and time consuming, so things aren't just added to the Bible on a whim. The author's decisions about what to include are intentional.

His neighbors and those who had formerly seen him begging asked, "Isn't this the same man who used to sit and beg?" Some claimed that he was. Others said, "No, he only looks like him." But he himself insisted, "I am the man."

What an odd exchange to include. And this story of mistaken identity continues. Some of the people WHO DID recognize the man report this miracle to the religious leaders, the Pharisees, who come to see if this report is true. They find the man and began to ask him probing questions about what happened, and how it was that he could see. He plainly tells them about the man who put mud on his eyes and sent him to wash in the pool. He tells them he believes the man is a prophet.

And the Pharisees don't believe his account! They call his parents to confirm whether or not this is their son, and whether or not he was born blind. Like what!?! Even the Pharisees think it's a case of mistaken identity or that this one-blind man is a con artist. His Mom and Dad show up, and confirm. "Yes, this is our son. Yes, he was born blind." "How did this happen?" "ASK HIM. He's of age!" All this talking about this man through other people, while discrediting the man's own account.

FOR THE SECOND time they find him, and say "who are you? How is it that you can see?" And the man, rightfully fed up with nobody recognizing him, fed up with his account of the events being questioned, says to them, "I have told you already and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples too?" Then they hurled insults at him and said, "You are this fellow's disciple! We are

disciples of Moses! We know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this fellow, we don't even know where he comes from." The man answered, "Now that is remarkable! You don't know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly person who does his will. Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." To this they replied, "You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!" And they threw him out.

What strikes me as interesting in this whole story is this thread of mistaken identity. People on the street were like, no, that can't be him! He's blind! The Pharisees doubt the man's identity and his account of events so much that they have to call his PARENTS to vouch for the man. This man that Jesus declared would reveal the glory of God. It would seem that the people in the city, the leaders, everyone who passed by this man each and every day COULD only see his disability, could only recognize the man based on what he lacked. They knew nothing about him as person, they only knew that his disability, they only knew him as "the blind beggar on the street." The people in the city's own blindness was about prejudice, about missing the place and people AND BODIES which God dwells inside of, they missed witnessing God at work because of a strict definition of who's in and who's out, of sinner and saint, of sacred and secular

And yet, Jesus doesn't miss this man. Jesus sees him, sees his body, sees all of him and says God will reveal himself in you. He says to this man, at that moment, and

pronounces his body as worthy of love, attention. Jesus calls him BELOVED. That is who he is, that is who is BOTH BEFORE AND AFTER THE MIRACLE.

That is his name, even when nobody else can see it. And here's the kicker, that is our name too. Even when we can't see it. Even when pain clouds are bodies. Even when we look in the mirror and see what we lack. Even when comparison steals our joy. God is with us, and calls us by name. I like to pray this verse over my kids, "But now, this is what the LORD says— he who created you, Jacob, he who formed you, Israel: "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine." Beloved One.

So Friends, for us, here this morning, I think there are two challenges in this story.

First, we can resist the temptation to see other bodies as less than. To recognize that God's spirit can dwell within each one of us. To know that God is showing Godself in unique ways to those on the edges-disabled bodies, elderly bodies, black, brown and Indigenous bodies. Let's not miss the unique revelations that diverse bodies have to bring to the faith story.

Secondly, we can go down one level deeper and remember that no matter what labels are assigned to us, what identity the world gives, what statements are

made about who we are and how we inhabit this space with our bodies -our Name is Beloved. We are seen, known and loved exactly as we are. I always tell my kiddos, "God loves you. There's nothing you could ever say or do that would make God love you less. There's nothing you could say or do that would make God love you more.

Let's aim to speak the name Beloved over an aching world even as God speaks that name over us. Amen.