

## **Get to Work!**

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John 9: 1-41

I have a friend who is a mental health professional, a counselor, out in Southern Illinois. In the wake of the shooting on the campus of NIU, a call was put out asking for counselors to come to the campus to help out with students dealing with the aftermath. Someone who'd gotten the notification by email, thought of Roger and gave him a call. So, thinking indeed he might be of some assistance and wanting to do that, even though he's a six hour drive away he called the campus to volunteer. Well, several repeated calls to the campus yielded no one who knew anything about this effort. Finally, he called his friend back and asked for more information about the email, and the friend forwarded it to him, because indeed it had a link on it. So, through that, not ever being able to actually talk to someone, but through the binary code of ones and zeroes that is how computers talk to each other, he was able to find out that he wasn't needed. They had it covered.

The reality of what they needed and were looking for was actual people who could sit down and talk with and offer comfort to hurting people, but he couldn't find anyone in this process to actually talk with. It's an interesting commentary on our society and in some ways perhaps a modern parallel to part of what's happening in this story from John's gospel. It seems that it's always a lot easier for us to get caught up in controlling processes in life, and in managing things than it is to actually get involved in the work God is doing in life. Theologian Stanley Hauerwas would say that's because we're actually all atheists, or at least deists. That is, no matter what we profess to believe, our actual beliefs are revealed by how we conduct our lives, which is, most of the time, as if there is no God, or at least no God who is actively *involved* in life and in the world: you know, the deist "clockmaker" god who created everything way back when and let it go, wound up the clock and went off to eat lunch.

That, or we reduce God's activity to what is done in the individual human heart. But, we tend to act as if God were no longer creating, or actively sustaining and redeeming creation, as if that's all been done, and now it's just up to us to manage and control what's here. So, in John's story, Jesus and his disciples are walking along when they happen upon a man blind from birth. The disciples immediately want to figure this out. They ask Jesus, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind." That might seem crass to us at first. We understand that kind of blindness as a genetic thing. But, theologically their question is one we still wrestle with. I mean they knew God to be a good God, and creation to be a good creation, so why would a good God who created a good creation let something like this happen to someone? And the answer they had come up with is that it must be sin. It must be punishment from a good and holy God for some sinful thing that either the man or his parents had done. How else do you account for such a "defect" in God's good creation?

And, it's not just the Pharisees who saw the world, and God's relationship to it in this way. The disciples asked the question. The blind man himself assumes the same thing when he says to the Pharisees in Jesus' defense, "We know that God doesn't listen to sinners." He was saying that, you remember, because the Pharisees insisted that Jesus was a sinner because he had healed this man on the Sabbath. Again, that might seem petty and crass to us... "those nasty old Pharisees!" But, it wasn't that they were just petty legalists, observing the Sabbath was about obeying and imitating God. According to scripture, that God rested on the seventh day. So, it was about imitating God! Jesus himself preached imitation of God: "Be merciful, as God is merciful."

So, although the disciples, the man, and the Pharisees, and pretty much everyone else were not functional atheists, they had pretty well confined the activity of God to whatever God is doing to deal with sin. And they felt like they had that activity pretty well outlined and nailed down.

So, if God didn't heal people like this man through the normal channels, it was obviously because the man and/or his family were just too repugnant to a holy God. And if Jesus acted outside the laws and rituals of religion attributed to God, then obviously he was a repugnant sinner, too. Well, the fact is, there *are* things and people that aren't what they should be. We know them. We have seen and experienced them. There are things we don't understand how a good God could let happen. Some of them might even have to do with blindness, or other genetic "defects." And, there are people who we condemn and blame for things being out of whack in the world. We have called them evildoers, we have called them abusers; we have called them sick. And we have sought to come up with ways to control and manage these various elements.

Or, in some cases, we've just come up with explanations, ways to try to understand them. You know there are those televangelists and other ministers who blame hurricanes and 911 on very specific sins and sinners among us that they see as particularly repugnant to God. They say those things are God's punishment for those sins. And beyond that explanation, they too have a program to control and manage those sins and sinners. So, maybe to greater or lesser degrees, our worldview isn't really so different from those first disciples and the Pharisees. And sometimes it comes down to us, too. We wonder: Why am I like I am? Why can't I be different in this or that way? Why is the world like it is?

There are things and people that aren't what they should be and we often want to blame and condemn, or to control and make boundaries. Well, listen to Jesus' answer to the disciples question about who sinned, who's to blame for this defect in God's good creation! "Neither this man nor his parents sinned..." The fact that he was born blind is an opportunity for God's works to be revealed! Says Jesus, "We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day..." "As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." Now, that goes right back the first chapter of John where John is talking about the creation, and he says "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." And he's talking about all things coming into being through him. And he ends that little section saying "and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness.

In other words the short version of Jesus' answer to the disciples is: God's still creating, so get to work, be part of that! What are you doing standing around wanting to place blame somewhere, or wanting to figure it all out so that proper blame can be placed. God's not finished yet, so get to work and be part of what God is doing! See, Jesus doesn't place God's work of creation as something in the past that now we have all figured out and just have to manage and live with the best we can. Jesus says God's still creating. God's still bringing order out of chaos, still bringing light in darkness. You know, that's also the view of Paul when he writes "the whole of creation has been groaning in labor pains (even) until now." Creation isn't finished yet and there are things that thwart God's purposes.

Or, as Jesus put it elsewhere, "The Kingdom of God suffers violence, and men of violence take it by force." Now, the Pharisees wouldn't see themselves as those who thwart God's purposes, and neither would Jesus' disciples. They were just trying to be good religious people. The Pharisees have given their lives to studying the scriptures so that they can obey God in their time and place. But, here's the thing. This story is like the story of Nicodemus from a few weeks ago. The Pharisees have spent so much time and energy in the scriptures figuring out just how God's justice and compassion operate in the world and through whom that they have nothing left to receive the reality of it when it's right in front of them. It's like Jesus saying to Nicodemus can't you feel the wind on your face? The man born blind says to them, "I have no idea who's a sinner and who's not." "All I know is though I *was* blind, now I see."

You see the difference? The disciples, the Pharisees see this man born blind and see a defect and so the man and/or his parents are to be blamed, condemned some way, and until the sin is

dealt with, excluded. Jesus sees this man born blind and sees God's unfinished work in creation and a chance to be part of finishing it! And so, Jesus at the end of this story, redefines what sin is, too. The essence of sin, the essence of what separates us from God, is not some defect, or some unholiness in us that needs condemning and casting out, or fixing. The essence of what separates us from living full life in God is being so sure we know what's what. It's being sure that we know the right things to believe. It's being sure that we know who's a sinner and what is unholy. It's being sure that we know the "facts." It's being sure that we know what's "realistic." The essence of what separates us from God is that surety by which we draw boundaries through and make condemnations about ourselves, our communities, and our world.

Says Jesus to the Pharisees, "If you were blind, you would not have sin..." that is, if you knew your own blindness, your own incompleteness. "But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains." Says Jesus, God's still creating, so we can't claim to have it all nailed down! You know, you've probably seen the bumper sticker, "God doesn't make junk. He just isn't finished with me yet." Have you heard or seen that? It's good. It contains in it this understanding that God is still creating and redeeming, that those are on-going works of God.

That's a good answer to those questions: "why am I like I am?" Or "why is the world like it is?" God isn't finished yet. But, I wonder why we either don't really accept it for ourselves, and instead spend a lot of time in self-hatred and shame and beating ourselves up, or we only accept it for ourselves and not for our enemies, or those we consider the real sinners in our world? I wonder why we don't say that about them, too. God's not through with *them* yet, just like God's not through with me yet. It could change our whole way of living and being, couldn't it? I don't think we'd spend nearly as much time trying to explain, or trying to blame, either others or God, or even just trying to control and manage processes. Do we really believe in a God who is still actively creating and redeeming creation? If so, then it's just like Jesus said: let's get to work and be part of working God's works of healing and helping, of loving and including!