

John 9: 1-13, 17, 24-25, 32-38

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Fred Harrell

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The Wilderness of Sickness

As a child I loved a show many of you will remember: Romper Room. First of all, the name. What a name. A room to “romp’ in! Sounded good to this little boy. Easily my favorite part of Romper Room, or my most unfavorable part, was when the teacher would pull out her magic mirror. She would look into it and say “I see Roger, and Sally, and Jane, and Richard, and Douglas, and John, and Michael...” and NEVER FRED! WHY NO FRED!? Only 4 letters! Easy to pronounce! But she never said Fred!

Everybody wants to be seen. Everyone needs to be seen.

Let’s put this story into context.

John 8 flows into John 9. Jesus is in Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles, teaching daily in the Temple, when among other things, the Jewish people would remember God’s provision in the Wilderness. A group of religious leaders thrust a woman “caught in adultery” in the midst of this, saying essentially, The Bible is clear, she should be stoned!” Jesus famously says, “Let him who is without sin cast the first stone.”

They walk away, and Jesus is reminded what darkness looks like — stoning sinners, trapping the vulnerable, discarding the unwanted. He comes to expose that darkness, calling himself “the light of the world.” He says, *“You’ve been walking in darkness, but if you live in my teaching, the truth will set you free. The only freedom you have is to hate your enemies and justify it with religion and nationalism. Jesus came to set us free from that—that’s the work of evil, not God.”*

So they try to stone him. John 8 is framed by two attempts of stoning in the name of religious purity.

It’s a mob impulse, and the mob is always wrong, or as Soren Kierkegaard said, *“the crowd is untruth. Christ was crucified because he would have nothing to do with the crowd.”* Stoning is perfect for angry mob violence because you can participate without feeling like you murdered anyone. Who knows whose stone struck the blow? It’s a way to bring down the anxiety and fragility and insecurities of the group in power. It is collective murder as the alchemy for peace and unity. It has nothing to do with truth. Everything to do with power. Jesus says it is “from the devil.”

Part 1: A Man Born Blind and the Work Jesus Does

So Jesus leaves and as he is walking through the gate, leaving the temple complex, He “saw a man blind from birth.” Jesus, again, always sees the person in need. The disciples then asked a dark question.

“Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

Can you see this as a third stoning — another act of blame? First the woman, then Jesus, now this man or his parents. The disciples ask a common question, looking for a simple explanation to ease their own fear. Blaming others helps us feel safe. And before we judge them, let’s admit—we do the same.

Here’s how the narrative works: bad things happen to bad people. So if someone is suffering, they must deserve it. It’s a way to protect ourselves from the fear that suffering could happen to us too. We create systems that blame the sufferer to feel safe. (Want a biblical critique of that logic? Start with the Book of Job.)

We want to believe good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people. But sometimes bad things happen to good people. Sometimes the worst things happen to the best people! Like Jesus for instance. And like so many right now around the globe who are suffering.

Jesus answers the dark question simply: “Neither this man nor his parents sinned.” He names the blindness not as punishment, but as a neutral fact through which God will reveal something sacred. Then comes pure theater: Jesus doesn’t just speak healing — he makes mud with spit and dirt. Even spit becomes sacred. (Remember that next time you drool on a plane!) He places the mud on the man’s eyes, sends him to wash in the Pool of Siloam — and he comes back seeing. Healed.

Part 2 - The Interrogations

First there are The Neighbors — “Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?” Some were saying, “It is he.” Others were saying, “No, but it is someone like him. He kept saying, “I am the man.”

Can you feel the frustration of the man born blind? They cannot see this man for what he is now, only for what he used to be. Instead of celebrating the man’s sight, they are terrified to accept his transformation.

The Religious Leaders throw a flag on the whole scenario, despite the man’s ability to see, because this was done on the Sabbath (Jesus’ favorite day to do just about anything in the gospels it seems). The man born blind now says simply: He is a prophet.

Now the Parents are called in. Not allowing marginalized people to speak for themselves has a long history. This man, like all marginalized people, has to suffer the indignity of others debating his existence. Some of you know exactly how this feels.

After the Religious Leaders call the man in a second time, he gives his simple, beautiful, confession of faith. "I was blind, now I see." Hard to argue with that!

I love an airtight argument. In a previous life I was a junior high youth pastor ... over 100 "junior highers." I loved it. I had a ninth grader who was sneaking out and getting drunk with friends. His parents asked me to "say something" to him. I sent a youth volunteer he connected with to talk to him.

Volunteer: "Billy, why are you sneaking out and getting drunk?"

His response: "I like beer. I like the taste of it. I like the effect it has."

My volunteer came back to me and said, "I didn't know what to say, I mean he's right."

Kids: not an excuse to disobey your parents!

And later the man adds heft to his confession, as he gains his sea legs and gets bolder:

"Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing."

He is not merely seeing; he sees and feels seen by a God of love and mercy. That is the seeing that will change your life. Only the blind blame the suffering! Only the blind obsess on blaming! New eyes obsess on extending mercy, grace, and the light that shines in the darkness.

Part 3 - Closing Scene

"Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him."

That's Jesus to a tee — seeking the lost, the last, and the lonely. You'll find him hanging out in the smoking section, at the outcast table in the cafeteria, in the refugee camp, and with the undocumented neighbor living in fear. Jesus is always with those cast out by people who love rules more than people.

Jesus finds the ones driven out by those who love rules more than people.

Friends, our calling isn't to assign blame — it's to see need and share God's mercy. When we believe we're right, we stop learning. When we see ourselves as righteous, we stop receiving grace. When we think we know who's good and bad, we miss mercy. And when we're sure we see clearly, we stop noticing anything new. But God often moves in unexpected people and places. While we may cling to old ways and rules, Jesus is always about the new — new vision, new mercy, new healing, new freedom.

Jesus comes to you today with spit and dirt, to rub in your eyes. What will you see?

Amen.