

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
March 15, 2026 – The Fourth Sunday of Lent
John 9:1-41 – Jesus and the Man Born Blind
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This account from the Gospel of John of Jesus healing the man born blind is much more than a description of a healing miracle. It is that, but the author of the Gospel also uses this event to talk about blindness in a much wider context than physical blindness. It seems that most of the characters in this drama are blind in some way – everyone, in fact, except Jesus.

The man healed by Jesus was, obviously, physically blind.

The disciples, in their wondering who had sinned to cause the man's blindness, are themselves blind to the reality of innocent suffering. Surely as they traveled with Jesus and watched him feed the hungry, heal the sick and cast out demons, they'd had enough experience of human life to know that many people suffer from afflictions of all kinds without anyone's sin being the cause. And they'd had enough experience to know that Jesus' reaction to a person's affliction was not to ask whose sin had caused it, but rather was compassion and healing.

The neighbors of the man born blind and those who had seen him beg are almost comical in their confusion and inability to see what was right in front of their eyes – the man who once was blind could now see. Even when “he kept saying, ‘I am the man’” (John 9:10), they couldn't stick with the reality in front of them. They wanted to know how the man had been healed and they wanted to know where the healer was. Like the disciples, they wanted an explanation of what they saw, and that desire clouded their vision of the truth.

Finally, there are Pharisees who are spiritually blind. To cure the blind man Jesus made mud on the Sabbath, a violation of the Jewish law prohibiting work on the Sabbath. Jesus had broken a religious law, so some of the Pharisees concluded “this man is not from God.” With their focus on the observance of laws which were made to help people glorify God by honoring the Sabbath, they were blind to the glorious work of God done by Jesus on the Sabbath – the healing of a man whose entire life had been constrained and limited by a congenital affliction. When the healed man challenges the Pharisees by saying, “If this man were not from God, he could do nothing,” they reply, “You are born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?” (John 9:33-34). The Pharisees could not admit that they were wrong about God and that this formerly blind beggar was right. To maintain their self-respect – and self-righteousness – they show scorn for the man favored by God and drive him out of the house of God. Jesus lets them know that their refusal to admit their spiritual blindness demonstrates their sin.

Many of us share the weaknesses of the characters in this drama. Like the disciples, we may get so caught up in trying to understand the world we live in that we don't see the opportunities right in front of us to do something to make the world a better place for others. Like the neighbors of the blind man, we fail to really see and appreciate the glorious work of God staring us in the face because we don't understand how God works or where God is, exactly. Like the Pharisees, we sometimes get so focused on what is small and relatively unimportant that we miss the bigger picture. Sometimes we may be so blind to our own faults or so unwilling to admit them that we criticize others and drive them away with scorn. This happens in the church today just as it did in the synagogue two thousand years ago.

Jesus' exchange with the Pharisees warns us of a deadly pitfall. If we think that we have all the answers about how and where God is at work, we are being willfully blind and will be held

accountable for this sin. God is greater than our comprehension. God is greater than our religious traditions. God is mysterious and surprising. With a humble spirit, we may look for God in works of light, justice, compassion, and love – anywhere and everywhere.

Today's Gospel lesson is all about sin, and that leads us to consider the sacramental rite called "The Reconciliation of a Penitent," or what we may refer to as individual confession (The Book of Common Prayer, pages 446 to 452). In both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament, "sin" is most often translated from words that mean "fall short" or "miss the mark." This gives us an idea of the way in which the Bible speaks of "sin" – not as a series of "bad acts," but as failing to meet a standard. In his letter to the Romans, Paul says (Romans 3:23): "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." If that is the standard, this is certainly a high bar. And in the early church, the bar was very high indeed – some Christians thought (and taught) that committing serious sin after one had been baptized was enough to end a person's hope of salvation.

In order to avoid this interpretation, the Christian church developed a way of dealing with serious sin among those who had been baptized: "confessing" one's faults and asking for God's forgiveness. "Confession," in the biblical sense, meant "acknowledgment." You could "confess" that Jesus was Lord (Philippians 2:11, Romans 10:9), and you could "confess" your sins (James 5:16). In both cases, the same word is used and basically means "tell the truth about."

At first, this "confession" was made in the presence of the whole community – standing in front of the congregation, admitting fault, and asking for forgiveness. But this requirement of completely public confession was judged to be too much of a barrier. I think we can easily understand a person's reluctance to confessing sin so publicly. Alternatives were needed.

The Anglican Church eventually settled on two methods of confession. "General Confession" takes place in a congregational worship service. Everyone recites a prayer of acknowledgment of sin and plea for forgiveness, and the priest or bishop pronounces absolution to the entire congregation. As you know, we do this in most of our Sunday services. You may have noticed that during Easter season – the "Great Fifty Days" from Easter through Pentecost – the General Confession is omitted.

The second option is "auricular confession," acknowledging your fault directly to one other person, a priest or bishop. In our church, at the time of ordination, priests are granted the authority to pronounce God's forgiveness and absolution of sin. The sacramental rite of "The Reconciliation of a Penitent," or individual confession, is available in our church for all who desire it. The church's approach to the rite is this: "All may, some should, none must."

Who might seek the rite of "The Reconciliation of a Penitent"? It may be someone whose conscience is very troubled by serious sins. It may be someone who desires a more personal, pastoral experience of confession and absolution than is available in the General Confession. In the context of "The Reconciliation of a Penitent" the priest has the opportunity to give counsel and encouragement to the person seeking God's forgiveness. The Prayer Book provides set words for confession and for absolution, but a more informal discussion can occur as well in as much time as a person needs. A final point, in the words of the Prayer Book (page 446): "The secrecy of a confession is morally absolute for the confessor, and must under no circumstances be broken."

There are two parts to the truth about our sin and God, captured in these two quotes from Scripture. "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8). "This is a true saying, and worthy of all to be received, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" (1 Timothy 1:15). May we be ever thankful for God's mercy. Amen.