

A Storytelling Commentary on John 9:1-41

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As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth.
His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents,
that he was born blind?"

Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned;
he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.
We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day;
night is coming when no one can work.
As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world."

When he had said this, he spat on the ground
and made mud with the saliva
and spread the mud on the man's eyes,
saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent).
Then he went and washed and came back able to see.

The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask,
"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."

But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?"
He answered, "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes,
and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash'
and I went and washed and received my sight."

They said to him, "Where is he?"
He said, "I do not know."

They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind.
Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes.

Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight.
He said to them, "He put mud on my eyes and I washed, and now I see."

Some 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.

So they said again to the blind man, "What do you say about him?"
It was your eyes he opened."
He said, "He is a prophet."

The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight

until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight
and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind?
How then does he now see?"

His parents answered, "We know that this is our son,
and that he was born blind;
but we do not know how it is that now he sees,
nor do we know who opened his eyes.
Ask him; he is of age.
He will speak for himself."

His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews.
For the Jews had already agreed
that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah
would be put out of the synagogue.
Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him."

So for the second time they called the man who had been blind,
and they said to him, "Give glory to God!
We know that this man is a sinner."
He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner.
One thing I do know: I was blind, and now I see."

They said to him, "What did he do to you?
How did he open your eyes?"

He answered them, "I have told you already, and you would not listen.
Why do you want to hear it again?
Do you also want to become his disciples?"

Then they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple,
but we are disciples of Moses.
We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man,
we do not know where he comes from."

The man answered, "Here is an astonishing thing!
You do not know where he comes from,
and yet he opened my eyes.
We know that God does not listen to sinners,
but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will.

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."

They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins,
and are you trying to teach us?"
And they drove him out.

Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him,
he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?"
He answered, "And who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?"

Jesus said to him, "You have seen him,
and the one speaking with you is he."
He said, "Lord, I believe."
And he worshiped him.

Jesus said, "I came into this world for judgment
so that those who do not see may see,
and those who do see may become blind."
Some of the Pharisees near him heard this
and said to him, "Surely we are not blind, are we?"

Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin.
But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains.

This story is structured in five sections. The first begins with, "As Jesus walked along he saw a man blind from birth," and ends with his saying, "I don't know" in response to their question, "Where is he?" There are seven episodes in this first set.

The second section starts with the Pharisees interrogating the formerly blind man. This section has the tone of a judicial hearing. The section ends with the healed man saying, "He's a prophet."

The third section is the interrogation of the man's parents by the Pharisees. It begins with "The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight," and ends with "He is of age; ask him." It is important to convey the fear of the man's parents that is implicit in the agreement among the Jews that anyone who would confess Jesus would be put out of the synagogue.

The fourth section is the second interrogation of the blind man in which the level of conflict builds to the climax of the expulsion of the formerly blind man from the synagogue. This is also the section in which the blind man comes into his own and begins to speak with confidence and authority. In response, they cast him out of the synagogue - the climax of the story.

The fifth section is the conversation between Jesus and the blind man, in which he makes his confession of faith. It is here that he becomes fully a person and responds to Jesus directly with no sense of hesitation or inferiority.

The last two episodes (9.39-41) are the beginning of Jesus' conversation with the Pharisees, which continues on into chapter 10. However, I would suggest that for the sake of the story that you end with "and he worshipped him." (9.38) What follows are utterly enigmatic statements that establish the puzzle for the dialogue that is to follow and that only become clear later.

One of the most important dynamics in learning and telling this story is the characterization of the blind man. You might think of this story as a birth narrative for the blind man in which he begins as a non-person who really doesn't exist to the world

around him and in which he has no sense of his own presence and voice and is nervous and unable to speak clearly (perhaps even stuttering). How you convey this transformation of the man born blind is up to you. At the beginning of the story you might convey it with gestures, bent over and shuffling like the hunchback of Notre Dame with a timid voice. His transformation can be conveyed by gradually standing tall with shoulders back and speaking with an increasingly strong and confident voice. In this healing, Jesus has given the man social status and a sense of dignity as well as his sight. It is very important to show the gradual growth of this man into a full person with his own voice.

The Pharisees' role in the story is that of authority figures. In Jesus' day, the Pharisees did not have the kind of power that is portrayed in this story. They were a lay movement of people who were intent on being religious and observing the Law. But they did not have political power in Jesus' day. After the Jewish War when the governmental structure organized around the Temple and the chief priests disappeared, the Pharisees became a primary authority and source of power in the Jewish community. This story then reflects the post-70 situation in the time of John, probably in the late 80's or early 90's. It is told in a way that connects with the situation of the post-war Jewish community and the struggle between Jews who believed that Jesus was the Messiah and those who did not.

The Pharisees in the story are judges who hold a kind of trial and find the blind man guilty and expel him from the synagogue. If you want to read about this, look at Lou Martin's classic book, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*, which outlines the Birkat HaMinim, the benediction against the heretics, that prayed that anyone who confessed Jesus as the Messiah was to be cursed. Expulsion from the synagogue also meant ostracism from the Jewish community.

The immediate reason for the scandal among the Pharisees in the story is that Jesus heals the man on the Sabbath. This also happens in John 5, in the story of the man at the pool of Bethzatha, who picks up his mat and walks. Jesus tells him to do this, which causes him to break the Sabbath law. This becomes an occasion for an enormous amount of hostility towards Jesus (5.19 ff.). Sabbath law was a defining issue in determining Jewish identity in the first century. In these stories you can sense the degree of conflict and hostility toward people who broke the law.

When we were in Jerusalem in 1978 we were on a bus that was driven by a Palestinian, and he drove the bus to the hotel, which was right on the edge of an Orthodox Jewish community, just after sunset on Friday night, the beginning of the Sabbath. The bus was immediately surrounded by men who were violently angry. They were beating on the bus and they went into the hotel and told the owner of the hotel that, if they ever allowed another bus to come there on Sabbath evening, they would shut down the hotel. They threatened to push the bus over. This was also a time when some Orthodox were throwing bricks at the cars of Jews who were driving on the Sabbath. Orthodox Jews take Sabbath laws very seriously.

The dialogue between the man born blind and the Pharisees is a crescendo of disagreement that ends with his being cast out of the synagogue and the Jewish community. In view of the possibility that this story can be told and heard as anti-Jewish, the Pharisees need to be presented as men who are concerned about the maintenance of the community rather than as a caricature of angry, uptight keepers of the law. This story is the product of intra-Jewish conflict about the meaning of Sabbath law and the significance of Jesus. However, while this story is not anti-Jewish polemic, it is calling attention to the blindness of the Pharisees who cannot see and celebrate the miracle that is happening right before their eyes because they are so preoccupied with the Sabbath. In this sense, the composer of this story strongly disagrees with the Pharisees. But the Pharisees are Jesus' frequent dialogue partner in the Gospel and probably represent many of the beliefs of John's audiences.

The delight of telling this story is describing the interaction between the blind man and the Pharisees and dramatizing the growth of the blind man. In the first episodes, he is a self-effacing, timid man. In the first hearing before the Pharisees, he is fearful and unsure of himself. The blind man's parents are also intimidated by the Pharisees and are afraid to say anything that might be incriminating. In the second hearing before the Pharisees, the blind man becomes ever more assertive and finally defiant in his assertion of Jesus' goodness. His final conversation with Jesus is a face-to-face exchange between two fully mature men who respect and believe in each other, even as the blind man affirms his belief in Jesus as the Messiah. I recommend presenting the man at the end of the story as standing tall and looking Jesus straight in the eyes and saying, "Lord, I believe" rather than bowing his head in some form of obeisance.

I would suggest that you make this story as human, direct, and intense as possible, especially in the development of the character of the blind man and what Jesus does for him. It is one of the great stories in the Bible. Jesus opens his eyes and that is the beginning of his full development as a person.