

WESTMINSTER
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SERMON

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Seeking: Who sinned?

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Jean Vanier founded communities across the world to serve people with disabilities, both physical and developmental. Through his life-long ministry, he witnessed their pain of being excluded and labeled with a disability and the power of Jesus' grace to turn the hearts of those guilty of discriminating and create a beloved community.

Before we hear the story for today and the fundamental question it poses, who sinned, let's turn to Vanier's poetic commentary on sin.

Sin is an act we do consciously.

It is disobeying a commandment of love given to us by God.

In the Gospel of John, however sin is above all the refusal to welcome Jesus and to trust him.

It is remaining obstinately blind in the face of signs and miracles he did to show that he was sent by God.

Sin is turning our back on him.

It is refusing to change and open our hearts to those in need.

Sin, then, is the wall constructed around our minds and hearts...

This wall is strengthened

As we consciously refuse to be healed

And even try to get rid of Jesus.

Sin then is being closed up in oneself and in one's group.

It leads to conflict, oppression and all forms of abuse of power.

Sin leads to death.¹

Just before our story, the religious leaders argue with Jesus about sin.

They defend themselves as descendants of Abraham, possessing the truth. They know sin when they see it.

As tensions boil and they find words fail, the authorities pick up stones to throw as Jesus leaves the temple.

*God of Good news,
there is reading your Word,
there is hearing your Word,
and then there is becoming vulnerable to the truth
of your word so that
you teach us to see
the world through as you see.
Open all our sense to believe your son.
With hopeful hearts we pray, amen.*

John 9:1-41

As he walked along, Jesus 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;

¹ Jean Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John*, (New York: Paulist Press, 2004), 147.

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.' Then 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. Then 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.

At this point in the story the bickering grows contentious. How did the healing occur?

The religious leaders interrogate the man. Unsatisfied, they grill the man's parents, as if he could not speak for himself. His parents quickly distance themselves of the miracle and their son, fearing judgement, and expulsion.

The religious authorities push. Again, the man born blind describes the reality of his healing. No more. No less. Let's return to the story to hear him defend Jesus...

"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."

The religious authorities 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? Tell me, so that I may believe in him." Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he."

The healed man said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped him.

The story begins with Jesus seeing a man blind from birth and responds to the basic question, "who sinned," by giving of himself. Even though the man does not ask, Jesus heals him.

He spits into dust, makes mud, slathers it on his eyes, sends him to wash. The man sees. Even though the simplicity of this treatment is told three different times, how Jesus performs the sign it is not the real point.

This is a story about many sorts of not-seeing — and at the end of the day, the question is whether we, the listeners to this story, will grasp its central meanings. It makes us twist and turn, not sure if we want to know how often we are the disciples, the man's parents, or religious leaders, or the man himself.

Will we, like the disciples, get distracted by simplistic questions of sin and seek tell-tale signs that someone deserve their difference, misery? We'd never be so callous as to blame someone for blindness. Instead, we support acts to improve

accessibility for those limited by mobility, sight, or hearing. And yet, how often do we look at generational poverty or ethnic difference that inhibits another's flourishing and see it as someone's fault and not ours to heal?

Will we, like his parents, deny a relationship with someone whose identity may put our position in a community at risk? Have we ever wanted someone to just keep quiet about discrimination or a violation against someone we know that could be construed as "you deserved it."

Will we, like the religious authorities, get bogged down in questions about whether or not the physical healing is genuine when what they really seek to defend are their tightly constructed walls? Will we be so afraid of change that we close off life?

In that twisting we miss what Jesus heals.

At its core, this is a story about Jesus reaching out to a man excluded.

Who sinned? Not the man healed. Nor his parents. Jesus' healing the man born blind exposes the sin of humanity's inability to accept the other, to love the other as God created them.

This sign in John's gospel points to the power of God's love to transform our hearts towards one another and our community into one of acceptance – that's the miracle Jesus sought to create. The subversive quality of this story, the

paradox, is that the one who was once blind is now the only one who can see properly.

Having found his sight, he could have become well integrated into society, no longer seen as punished for some sin. Instead, he chose to believe not in the rules or dogmas but in the experience of Jesus' mercy. And in standing up for the truth, he finds himself excluded once again. Maybe it is because this man is ostracized and willing to believe that Jesus reappears. From a tender dialogue, the man proclaims for all to hear, "I believe."

Isn't that the goal of Jesus? As proclaimed in the opening of John's gospel, To all who received him, who believe in his name, he gave the power to become children of God. (Jn1:12).

This week, as I wrestled with this man's story, I know that as a typically abled person, I cannot know the stigma of a physical disability. This story resonates for his candor.

Emil Sands has a form of cerebral palsy which affects one side of the body. Rather than the clinical definition, he prefers the romance of his high-school Greek teacher's translation: he was, *struck on one side*.

At birth, the forceps used to pull him out of the womb pierced his baby-soft skull and damaged his motor skills.

As a child, his symptoms were more pronounced than they are now. He simplified his deformities with other kids at school by saying: "I had a Good Side and a Bad Side." His Good Side, his left, was a superhero. Although right-handed, he had to teach himself to use the superhero side. His Bad Side, he considered

“a cave-dwelling creature, a Caliban, a spindly, weak, shameful thing.” He used to scream at his mother, crying, *You did this. You gave birth to this.*

He also had a noticeable limp. Swimming helped. Working out as well. Rather than me tell about him, listen to his words...

Today, hardly anyone knows I am disabled. I tell no one, because I believe people will like me less. Maybe just for a split second. Maybe for longer. Or maybe I should rephrase: I believe people will like me more if they think I am like them. So, I go out of my way to keep my disability private. When I am tired, a residue of my old limp returns. On the few, but truly excruciating, days that someone notices and asks if I have hurt my leg, I lie and say I twisted my ankle ... On the rare occasions when I don't lie, I always wish that I had. *Wait, what? You're disabled?* The chasm opens again.

I want to tell them that all of these things are not my fault, but the fault of a rogue forceps blade 23 years ago. I want to show them my medical records, drag them to my gym bench, and point out everything that's wrong with my form, or my body, or my brain, because then I could stop second-guessing. I could own my condition. But I am not Achilles.

When my dad first overheard me lie about my limp, he was astonished. We had a follow-up conversation in which he asked me why I had done that...Exasperated and embarrassed, I pretty much told him to back off. He did, but his eyes said enough: This is not the son I raised.

And he was right. I know more than most that difference must be celebrated, and that each time I hide, the shame builds—for me, for others like me. Somehow, I have become the bully, or at least the bully's accomplice.

I am not sure I want to hide anymore. I'd rather embrace my disability than fear its fallout. But it would be a lie to say I love every part of my body. I am still grappling with the ways I have been made to feel that my body does not belong—and with the conviction that it is easier for everyone that I be a failing normal rather than a normal disabled.²

Today we baptized two babies. The early church often turned to this story when they celebrated the rite of baptism, seeing it as a prism, pointing back to the beginning of time when God reached to the dust of the ground, as a potter, breathed life into the human. After we left the Garden of Eden, God never stops pursuing us, to bring us back into faithful relationship.

As God with us, Jesus used dust and his saliva, to make mud. When washed in the pool called “sent,” this man healed, professes “I believe.” He said, “I believe in Jesus,” meaning I am in relationship with God through him.

² Emil Sands, “Society Tells Me to Celebrate My Disability. What If I Don’t Want To?” *The Atlantic*, March 2023, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2023/03/cerebral-palsy-disability-treatment-limp/672777/>

In our baptism, we are washed in the waters, and sent into the world, forever in relationship with Jesus.

In baptism this congregation, on behalf of the wider church, promises to support the parents, to live in ways that show the rest of the world what a loving, inclusive community looks like. We stand up to bullies. We side with anyone not typically abled.

Who sinned? As we walk closer to the shadow of the cross, we need to confront our own sin and society's sin. And through this story ask the question, who received grace? The one willing to follow Jesus.



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