

# Can I See My Blindness?

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Psalms 23

I Samuel 16: 1-13

Ephesians 5: 8-14

John 9: 1-41

Many years ago, when I was in college, it was required of every student to take a course in "short story." We studied short stories, and then were required to write one ourselves. This was the most universally hated and detested course, and it was also well known that this particular course attracted a lot of plagiarizing. I sometimes overheard the bragging in the dorm about lifting a neat story out of Redbook magazine, changing a few names and actually getting an A. I don't know just how it came about that Bethel College had this requirement, but I happened to enjoy it a great deal. I threw myself into my first attempt at writing a short story, and that had a lot to do with my eventual choice of major. You guessed it. I majored in English, and the rest, you might say, is history.

Our cultural arrogance teaches us that the short story is a uniquely American invention, and that O. Henry and Edgar Allen Poe were its unexcelled inventors. Today, however, I want to take you back a couple of millenia, all the way back to the gospel of John in the New Testament. I want to suggest that John was a master of the short story long before we ever heard of O. Henry or Edgar Allen Poe or Guy de Maupassant. I would even argue that it is only by understanding John as a short story writer that we understand him at all, and that we actually miss the boat when we, as preachers, distill John's wonderfully written short stories down to three points and a conclusion.

So here goes. I will recite the scripture for today as the artfully written short story that it is, and then, with the help of my worthless BA degree, majoring in English, I will make a few critical comments to help us understand the story as a story instead of a sermon. This is one of my favorite short stories found in the Bible:

As they were walking along, they came upon a man who had been born blind. The disciples said to Jesus, "Teacher, who sinned, this man or his parents, causing him to be blind?" Jesus answered, "Well actually neither this man nor his parents sinned. His blindness is not a moral failure but is, in fact, a way for God's power and grace to be shown through him. That's why I am here, because it is my work to bring light into the darkness of people's lives."

As he was talking, he was already bending over and making a little wad of mud on the ground where he had spit. With his index finger he smeared the mud on the eyes of the blind man and then said to him, "Okay, you can go now, and wash yourself in the pool of Siloam." So the man went and washed his eyes, and when he came back, he could see.

Now some of the man's neighbors just happened to take note of this, and they said, "Hey, isn't this guy the blind beggar?" Some said, "Well, I'll be darned if it isn't," and others

said "Of course not. It can't be. It's not who you think it is." The man himself said "Hey you guys. It's me." They said to him, "Well now, just how is it that your eyes have been opened?"

The man answered, "This guy named Jesus spit on the ground and made some mud, which he smeared on my eyes, and then he told me to go wash in the pool of Siloam, so I went and washed, and now I can see. See?"

The neighbors said to him, "Where is this Jesus?" He said, "I don't know. He may have left town by now."

But the neighbors didn't want to leave things hanging in midair like that, so they took the man to the teachers of the law, who were supposed to verify all healings. But there was this problem: the healing had been done on the Sabbath, and even such works of healing were prohibited on the Sabbath. The teachers of the law asked the man to tell his story again, so he did. Some of the teachers said, "Well, this man Jesus cannot be from God because he is arrogant. He thinks he is above the law. He breaks the rule against doing work on the Sabbath, and we cannot make an exception for him just because this happened to be a work of healing rather than gathering firewood." Others weren't quite so sure. They said, "If this man Jesus is not doing the work of God, then how do you explain the guy standing right in front of you with his eyes wide open. Even a caveman should understand this, and we shouldn't be having an existential meltdown over it."

So there was a deep division among the scholars, and they decided that it was no use going on nitpicking. It was too important. So they called a session of the council and asked the healed man to come in and tell them in a more formal way just how this alleged "healing" had occurred. Then, after the man repeated his story, they asked him, "Now just what do you think about the man who opened your eyes?" The man said, "He's for real. I don't think he's a charlatan or an exploiter of any sort. He didn't even ask me for a thank you. He didn't ask me to endorse his product. So to me that means that God must be somehow working through him."

This left the scholars in a quandary since they were pretty sure that this man Jesus did not have proper healing credentials. So they thought there must be some other ways to think about this. Maybe, in fact, the man who claimed to have been healed had never been blind in the first place. That was worth checking out, they thought, so they called the man's parents into their council and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind, really born that way, and if so, how is it possible that he now sees?" The parents answered, "Well, we know that he is our son, and we also know that he was born blind. But how it is that he now sees we do not know. Ask him. Good grief, he is an adult. He can speak for himself." The parents were afraid of getting kicked out of the synagogue if they gave a definitive answer, since it had already been decreed by the religious authorities that anyone who accepted Jesus as Messiah was to be expelled.

So the professors, realizing that they were back at square one, called the man who had been born blind into their council again, and said to him, "We happen to know that this man whom you call your healer is in fact an impostor." The man answered, "Well, whether he is an impostor or not is not mine to say. I only know that whereas I once was blind, now I see." The council members said, "Well now, just how did this great eye-opening experience come about?" The man answered, "You know, I have told you everything I know. Can't you see?"

What is your problem? Do you want me to tell you the whole story again so that you can become confessors yourselves?"

This sarcasm was too much for the teachers, so they shouted at him, "Hey, it looks like you have become a believer! Don't go pinning that one on us! We are followers of Moses, not some faith healer who comes around, breaks the law and tricks people into believing something not sanctioned by the synagogue. Come on. As for this Jesus who you claim healed you, we don't know who he is or where he came from."

The man rolled his eyes. "Wow. This is really something. You say you don't know who he is or where he came from, yet you don't admit to yourselves what your own eyes are telling you! This is unbelievable! Never since the world began has it been possible for one who was born blind to have his eyes opened. Now if that isn't from God, then for heaven's sake tell me what comes from God."

The council members were pretty upset that this simple man could make such an assault on the authority they presumed was theirs, so they said to him, "Oh, now you will be our teacher? You know something, mister, your impudence is enough to prove your guilt. You have cooked up something pretty fishy with the help of this itinerant faith healer. We really have no alternative but to expel you from the synagogue." And that's exactly what they did.

When Jesus got wind of this, he decided to look the man up. When he had found him, Jesus asked, "Do you believe in God's messiah?" The man answered, "Sir, seeing is believing. You know, if I could see the guy I would believe in him, I think." Jesus said, "This is so easy a caveman can do it. You are looking right at him. Don't go having an existential meltdown right now." The man answered, "Oh boy, you said it. Yep. I can see what I'm looking at, and doggone it, it looks like the real thing to me."

Then Jesus turned to the folks who had been following him around and said, "You know, this is exactly the kind of thing I am here to do. Those who can't see will have their eyes opened, and those who think they see things so clearly will just go on being blind." Some of the council members happened to be in the crowd and they heard what Jesus said. "Oh, so now you are calling us the blind ones? Hey, we're smart enough to know when we've been had." Jesus said to them, "Look, if you could at least admit your own blind spots to yourselves, there'd be hope for you, but now that you insist on how well you are seeing things, you'll just have to go on being blind."

Now let me make a few comments, more in the nature of literary criticism rather than preaching. After all, I have to justify majoring in English somehow or other!

First of all, to state the obvious, the story is a great example of the masterful use of irony and double entendre. All the way through, John is having so much fun with the concept of blindness and seeing. He freely slings these words around so much, we almost get dizzy trying to follow him. For example, was the blind man healed of his physical condition, or was he given spiritual sight as well? Obviously, the man had his eyes opened in more ways than one.

Secondly, to us, whose great enemy is familiarity, we tend to miss how the story very carefully elevates the meaning of the questions every time the man is called upon to give an

answer, and the man's responses to the questions go ever deeper and deeper. At first he simply gives the obvious truth that whereas he was blind, now he can see. Then, under continued questioning by the authorities, the man acknowledges that Jesus is "a prophet." Under still more questioning which, we fear, could have led to waterboarding, he becomes a stout defender of Jesus, and then finally, with Jesus' gentle questioning he shows that his life has indeed been completely turned around.

Now let's look at the other side of the coin. Those hapless scribes and teachers, the keepers of the law, the holders of the keys, not only continue in their blindness, but they get more and more blind with every confrontation. So while the healed man is ascending, they are descending. They are actually getting blinder and blinder while he is seeing more and more clearly.

As I have already intimated, this happens to be one of my favorite short stories found in the Bible, and when I deal with this thing, I am always frustrated over what to say about it because so much is begging to be said. What a blessed relief it was for me to run across a little book on the gospel of John that has just been sitting there for nearly 50 years on my bookshelf. I consulted this little book and found that the writer says the following, with which I will close: "The preacher and congregation might have their sight restored merely by the retelling of the story."

Amen. So be it.