**Speak For Yourself**

*Rev. John Allen*

This story is full of people who are seem to already know everything.

It gets started right of the bat with the disciples, who upon seeing a man sitting by the side of the road, blind and begging, ask Jesus. Whose the sinner, him our his parents? Whose fault is it that he is like this.

They were certain that there must be so simple an explanation.

Jesus of course has no patience for that.

“It’s nobody’s fault. You are asking the wrong question.”

You should be asking how God’s mysterious glory might be revealed, even in his life. You should be asking not who caused the suffering. But instead, what we are going to do about it?

And the guy was in luck, he had especially direct access to God that day, who stooped down, mixed saliva with the dust of the ground, smeared it on his eyes and bid him go. And wash. And see.

And He did. And he could.

Miracle of miracles.

So he came home, to another torrent of questions this time from his neighbors.

“Are you the same man who used to sit here and beg? Couldn’t be. He was blind. You must be someone else who looks like him.”

Notice how they don’t even wait for him to answer their questions, they supplied their own answers. They didn’t even listen.

And after all they already knew that the blind could never again see.

For his part. The bigger couldn’t say it enough. “It’s me. I am the man.”

“That man Jesus, he made mud and spread it on my eyes and told me to go wash. I did. And now I can see.”

Who knows if that satisfied the neighbors, but there was a new cast of questioners arriving. The religious elites. The Pharisees.

Again, a question. “How?”

Same answer: “That man Jesus, he made mud and spread it on my eyes and told me to go wash. I did. And now I can see.”

Well that wouldn't do. Because those religious leaders already knew one thing for sure. God did’t work on the sabbath. And neither should we. He is a sinner. And they *knew* that God did not work through sinners.

Aha. They thought to each other. The man was never blind to begin with. Somebody find his parents. You hang on, we’ll get to the bottom of this.

Everyone is running this way and that because they already knew everything. They were already sure that it cannot be true. And the man, to his credit, stays calm, and keeps telling them what happened.

“That man Jesus, he made mud and spread it on my eyes and told me to go wash. I did. And now I can see.”

“Here are his parents”

“O Good. Is this your son? Was he really born blind.”

The parents say, ““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.”

Leave it to his parents to finally give everyone a great piece of advice. “Why are you asking us, if you want to know what happened to him, ask *him.”*

But we already know what he is going to say, don’t we:

“That man Jesus, he made mud and spread it on my eyes and told me to go wash. I did. And now I can see.”

No one around him can believe that it could be so simple. They already knew everything they needed to know. Sinners can’t heal. The sabbath is a day when none are made well. The blind cannot see. The beggar is a liar.

They knew it wasn’t true.

But he just kept telling them. “It is.”

—

A story about another man. Incidentally named John. Not me.

When he was 11 years old, he first went to sea with his father. He lost his job as a merchant due to “"unsettled behavior and impatience of restraint.”

At 18 years old, he was forcibly pressed into service in the British Navy as a midshipman on the HMS Harwich.

John was a contemptuous young man, and troubled. He tried to desert his post, and was caught and flogged in front of the whole crew. He was so angry that he hatched a plot to murder the captain before throwing himself into the Ocean to end his life.

But relief came for him the the form of a transfer, to crew on a ship called *Pegasus* which transported kidnapped West Africans to the Caribbean to be enslaved. This work suited him well and he became a very successful captain of slave ships for most of his life.

In his 30’s John traded in his life at sea for an office job, and at this point he began to return to some of the religious teachings of his childhood.

His mother had died when he was 7, but in the short time he knew her his fondest memories had been sitting on her lap hearing Bible stories.

And so he returned to those stories.

He hosted Bible studies in his home. He began attending church again.

The more he read, and prayed, and worshipped, the more he came to know and love God, the more he became disgusted with slavery, and with his own role in it.

He became a pastor. And an abolitionist, who devoted the second half of his life endeavoring to end the catastrophic injustice of the slave trade. He wrote about his own experiences on those ships to help explore the world to the truth and the horror.

When he died in 1807, he left behind the words that he wanted to have engraved on his headstone. You can still see it in Olney, England. It reads:

 “John Newton, once an infidel and libertine, a merchant of slaves, was, by the rich mercy of Jesus Christ, preserved, restored, pardoned, and appointed to preach the faith he had long labored to destroy.”

John Newton wrote something else before he died. A hymn.

 “ Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.

 I once was lost. But now I am found. Was blind, but now I see.”

—

Here is the funny thing about our scripture story from today. It’s about the healing of a blind man. But not the one you think.

Yes, the beggar regains his sight. Miracle of miracles.

But who is really the blind one?

Is it him?

Or is it the disciples, who look upon a beleaguered man bent on the side of road and only see a problem of sin?

Is it us, when we blame the poor and the addicted for their state?

Or is the neighbors who encounter a man with the story of a miracle, and they cannot see that it is the same man they walked past day after day after day, averting their eyes to avoid the discomfort?

Is it us, when we cross the street to avoid refusing a panhandler?

Or is it those religious elites who cannot see that God is up to something new. Something incredible. Something worthy of gratitude, reverence, and praise?

Is it us, when we fearfully close a familiar world tightly around us, refusing to see the beauty that lies beyond our gaze.

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It’s one thing to help a person see for the first time in their lives, but the truth is that doctors may be pretty close to doing just that. It would be a miracle, without question.

But the greater miracle still is healing the kind of blindness that is everywhere in this story.

Blindness to the gift of God all around us. Blindness to the world God desires. Blindness to God’s amazing grace.

The kind of blindness that might allow a sailor to, for half his life, see humans as cargo.

John Newton was healed of that blindness. It was the greatest miracle of his life.

He knew that such transformation was about the greatest miracle God might work. And he wanted you to know about it.

So he wrote us a song.