

John 9 (selected verses): As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. ² His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" ³ Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him... 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, ⁷ saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see... They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. ¹⁴ Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. ¹⁵ 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." ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ 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." ... 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." ²⁵ He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." ²⁶ They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" ²⁷ 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?" ²⁸ Then they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. ²⁹ We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from." ³⁰ The man answered, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. ³¹ We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. ³² Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. ³³ If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." ³⁴ 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?"^[e] ³⁶ He answered, "And who is he, sir?^[f] Tell me, so that I may believe in him." ³⁷ Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." ³⁸ He said, "Lord,^[g] I believe." And he worshiped him. ³⁹ 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." ⁴⁰ Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, "Surely we are not blind, are we?" ⁴¹ Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains.

When I was in college, I travelled with a group of high school and college students from my United Methodist conference to visit Glide Memorial United Methodist Church in San Francisco. Glide has one of the largest outreach and social justice ministries of any churches in the country, feeding over 3 million people every year, spending millions of dollars building units of housing for people who are homeless, and an incredible addiction recovery ministries. When our group arrived, Rodney, a drag queen by night and staff member at Glide by day led our orientation, and I will always remember what he said to begin: "We don't need you."

Wait a minute, I thought the whole reason we were there was to volunteer, to serve. We were there because they did need us, right? Rodney paused for a moment to let his comment linger and then he said, "We have more than enough people from our own community to serve all the people we serve. But we want you to be here as our guest because we think you have something

to learn and we think you have your own places that need healing. We are all addicted to something.”

I didn't know it at the time, but Rodney had just taught us the bedrock principle of Glide's theology of addiction – we are all addicted to something. That lesson didn't sink in until I attended one of Glide's recovery circles. Still caught in the mindset that I was the person who had everything together and was there to help people who didn't, I thought I was going to observe a recovery circle. As the meeting began, as is typical in the recovery community, each person introduced themselves and named their addiction.

“Hi, I'm George, and I'm a drug addict.”

“I'm Cedric and I'm an alcoholic.”

It was my turn and I said, “I'm R.G. and I'm glad to be here and thank you for welcoming me.”

There was an awkward silence as the recovery circle facilitator stared at me for what felt like an eternity and then he said, “You need to get real. There's no place for observers in our meetings. So you can either participate or you can leave.”

I took a deep breath and said, “I guess if I'm honest, I'm addicted for people to see me as someone who doesn't have addictions.” The part I didn't say out loud is that “I've always needed people to see me as better than someone who has an addiction.”

The main reason my addiction was in presenting myself as better than others is because I had always understood the world (and people) as divided into categories of good and bad, often framed using the language of sin. I grew up in a small town in northeast Alabama and we had very clear categories of sin, especially for teenagers: drinking, using drugs, premarital sex, and cussing, and these categories of sin allowed us easily to group people as either good or bad.

Drug users = bad.

Teenage girls who get pregnant = bad.

This way of dividing my teenage world into good and bad people went beyond just church and sin language. It was actually a bedrock premise of what I learned to be the American dream that carried me into adulthood. Good, hard working people are successful, and, therefore, if someone is poor, then there must be something wrong with them. They must be lazy. And while I have no doubt that those of you who are from New England probably didn't have the same experiences as I did in rural Alabama, my guess is that most of us have experienced this framework of dividing the world into good people and bad people, hard-working people and lazy people, the right kind of people and the wrong kind of people.

There's all sorts of problems with this way of thinking of sin, or success, or failure, but perhaps the most glaring is that it treats us all as if we are independent isolated units who have complete control over our lives while ignoring both how interconnected we all are as well as the systemic

injustices at play. For instance, if good and bad, right and wrong, success or failure is thought to primarily be about individual choices, then that can easily become a justification for the status quo.

For the first ten years of my ministry, I was the pastor of a black congregation in the neighborhood with the lowest median income in the state of Alabama. Everyone in my congregation lived below the federal poverty line. And while I could name you a dozen systemic reasons for the challenges our community faced, the perception was that there was something wrong with the people in that community. They are lazy and won't work, and yet I had women in my church who worked three jobs. Or there are too many absent dads, but I somehow never had a problem finding male dads to chaperone youth trips. Or there are too many drug addicts, or too much crime, or too little emphasis on hard work. In other words, it's their own fault.

We see this dynamic at work in our gospel reading today. In the story, the Pharisees are thought of as "the good people" and the blind man as the bad person, "the sinner." But it was not just the Pharisees who promoted and bought into this framework. Jesus' own disciples did so as well. The passage begins with Jesus' disciples pointing out the blind man and asking, "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Notice that so often categories of good and bad go far beyond behavior that is within our control and label an entire group of people bad for something completely outside of their control. In this case it was being born blind.

There are so many harmful things about this way of thinking of sin—it induces shame, guilt. It's been used as a weapon against those in the LGBTQ community. But maybe the most harmful thing this framework causes is that it builds a narrative that supports oppression. All forms of oppression have a narrative. That's why those who oppress the LGBTQ community like to talk about the sanctity of marriage. Or why those who implement policies that contribute to mass incarceration talk about the lack of black fathers in their children's lives, or why those who want to dismantle the social safety net talk about personal responsibility. If the narrative is compelling, regardless of whether it is true or not, then it becomes a mechanism to justify oppression. And it becomes particularly powerful when the narrative just becomes assumed—not just by the rich and powerful, the people who most benefit from the status quo, but by common, everyday people, and, sometimes, it is even believed by the people who are oppressed by that narrative.

That's what had happened to the disciples. The religious elite of Jesus' day had constructed a narrative that said those who were blind, those who were sick, those who were paralyzed were more sinful than everyone else. This narrative served two purposes. First, it explained why the person was suffering and it gave people the mirage of control—namely, if I don't sin, I won't be blind. Of course, we all know that isn't true, but truth doesn't matter when it comes to narratives of oppression. All that matters is if you believe the narrative to be true. And secondly, this narrative allowed the religious elite to justify not caring for those who are suffering. Even though, the Old Testament Scriptures are filled with commands to care for the vulnerable, the religious elite of Jesus day had abdicated that responsibility and they had done so by creating a narrative that it was their own fault that they were suffering, so why should they do anything about it?

But Jesus won't have it. He responds to his disciples, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," he says...and in doing so, Jesus completely shatters the narrative of the oppressor. And that was unbelievably threatening to those in power. The reason the religious leaders questioned the formerly blind man twice and his parents once is not because one person was healed, but because Jesus had completely dismantled their narrative. Those who are blind, those who are sick, those who are poor, those who speak a different language or come from a different land, those who are attracted to people of the same sex or both sexes are no more sinful than any of the rest of us. Jesus will not allow us the excuse of calling someone a sinner to justify their marginalization.

Friends, I would argue that one of the reasons we've never truly achieved something resembling racial justice in our country is because we've never truly rejected the oppressive narrative that blames societal ills on individual choices. When I think back to my first church and that community and communities like it, we've far too often accepted the narrative about bad personal choices and lack of fathers and laziness when the actual narrative goes something like this: white supremacy is as much a part of our DNA as a nation as is the Constitution or the Declaration of Independence. This country was built on the slaughter of indigenous people and the enslavement of black people. White people's generational wealth was in part gained through acts of racial terror and lynch mobs in the 1880s and redlining in the 1980s. Black political power has consistently been stymied by assaults on voting rights and mass incarceration.

That's the part of our narrative we rarely tell and yet it is far more truthful about the challenges of communities like my old neighborhood than the ones that blame the people there for those challenges. But that's a hard narrative to hear, isn't it?

And this is the part of my sermon where I would love to go on my rant about the Pharisees. I would love to give you examples of modern day Pharisees too, maybe even name some names. I would love to call out the white supremacists who hold positions of power in our land while at the same time establishing my own credentials as, you know, the good kind of white person. But this is Lent. And Lent doesn't invite me to confess other people's sin, but it does invite me to confess my own.

And this brings me back to that Recovery circle at Glide that I made the mistake of thinking I could simply observe some twenty years ago. The truth is that I want to buy into the narrative of the Pharisees so I can take the credit for all the good things that have happened to me and lay blame at the feet of those who lack. When I served my church in Birmingham's West End, we did a lot of innovative programs that required a lot of funds. And it turns out I was pretty good at raising money, at least I thought I was. But you see, there was another United Methodist Church in that same neighborhood whose pastor, Pastor Lewis, was a black man 30 years older than me. He started and led an innovative recovery ministry and, as a former professional musician, offered some of the most dynamic worship in the city. And a few years after I started at my church, he had to shut down his recovery house due to lack of funding.

So here's the thing. By any objective view, Pastor Lewis was a better pastor for that community than me. I was a 24 year old white kid who had never served any church before, much less one where everyone in the congregation was black. Pastor Lewis was a 55 year old black man who had served as a pastor in that community for more than 15 years. He was a better preacher, a

dynamic worship leader, and he actually knew a thing or two about what ministries the community needed, and, as a black man himself, he understood the experience of people in that community better than I ever could. But because in the United Methodist world, most money for missions and outreach is in affluent, predominately white churches, I had access to resources that he didn't. Or to say it differently, people trusted me with their resources more than him for no other reason than because I was white and knew how to navigate their world.

So here's my confession: while I never said it out loud, I secretly took pride and liked to think of myself as the best pastor in that neighborhood. I liked to think it was all because of how great I was that I could raise money and he couldn't. But here's the truth. It was because I was white and he was black. Period. That was the only reason. And that reason is not a challenge to the narrative of white supremacy, but rather is a part of it.

When I was in that Recovery circle at Glide, I wanted to maintain the narrative that I was different than the people in the room because I wanted to think that I was better than them. A decade later, I wanted to maintain the narrative that I was a radical innovative pastor in a black community and people supported my church because the work, my work, spoke for itself. But thank God the recovery circle leader wouldn't let me off the hook. Thank God, Pastor Lewis lovingly, yet firmly, reminded me that I have access to groups that would never invite him in. You see, it turns out that I too am an addict. I'm addicted to a white supremacist narrative where I can claim that everything I have is because I deserve it and every success I've achieved is through my sheer ability alone.

But friends, that narrative is a lie—it is for me. And it is for you too. And that's a hard truth to accept, isn't it? So hear the good news, the season of Lent is not about guilt or shame. Rather, it's about healing and wholeness. You see, I believe that Jesus not only wanted to heal the man born blind from his physical blindness but that he also wanted to heal the Pharisees from their spiritual blindness that made them believe they were superior. But they had to first open their eyes. They first had to admit they had a problem.

Friends, the truth is that the narrative of white supremacy may be comfortable, but it is ultimately harmful to everyone. So this Lent, those of us who are white are invited to let go off the narrative that allows us to believe we have earned every privilege and advantage we enjoy and to instead begin the hard work of dismantling white supremacy, starting in our own hearts.

So I'll start...My name is R.G. and I'm addicted to the white supremacist narrative that makes me want to take credit for the things that I have achieved primarily because I'm white. So now it's your turn. And make sure you remember, in the work of racial justice that is a core part of our faith, there is no place for observers.