

HOLY MUD
A Sermon by Rev. Joann H. Lee
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John 9:1-40

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. 4 We[a] must work the works of him who sent me[b] while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. 5 As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” 6 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. 8 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?” 9 Some were saying, “It is he.” Others were saying, “No, but it is someone like him.” He kept saying, “I am the man.” 10 But they kept asking him, “Then how were your eyes opened?” 11 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.” 12 They said to him, “Where is he?” He said, “I do not know.”

The Pharisees Investigate the Healing

13 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.”

18 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 19 and asked them, “Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?” 20 His parents answered, “We know

that this is our son, and that he was born blind; 21 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.” 22 His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus[c] to be the Messiah[d] would be put out of the synagogue. 23 Therefore his parents said, “He is of age; ask him.”

24 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.

Spiritual Blindness

35 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?”

INEVITABLY, WHEN WE READ SCRIPTURE FROM A 21ST CENTURY PERSPECTIVE, there will be moments that seem “cringe-worthy.” And especially as we read through the Gospel of John, we find many of the binaries that the writer presents to be problematic.

Jesus, however, was brought up in what is often referred to as an Honor/Shame culture. In this Honor/Shame culture, anything that was experienced as negative or non-normative was thought to be the result of a sin or some kind of shame in that family. Most people in Jesus’ time had a hard time accepting that some things in life just happen, not as a result of anyone’s wrong-doing or as punishment, but because life is sometimes difficult or unfair or simply just different than what we had hoped or expected.

Even today, it can be tempting to want to assign blame or find the source of our hardships. And admittedly, sometimes it can be traced to something concrete.

But more often than not, we just don’t know.

In today’s scripture, Jesus’s disciples want to know. They ask him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” What a presumptuous question!

Jesus responds not with either/or but with neither/nor saying, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.”

Now I know that for some, we will interpret the work of God as the healing of the man who was blind. But I believe that God was already at work in that man, regardless of whether he could see or not. And I daresay that God has done plenty, if not more, through those without sight as God has with those who have sight.

Stevie Wonder, Ray Charles, Helen Keller, and our own Lou Grosso come to mind. All of whom have done more to show God’s incredible creativity and love than I ever will!

So Jesus’s answer debunks this Honor/Shame understanding of disabilities and different abilities.

This cultural perspective laid the foundation for a prosperity gospel which we see in some churches still today. This distortion of the gospel, where God rewards those who are supposedly “faithful” with good health, wealth, and power, is a modern-day continuation of this misguided religion. Jesus rejects that understanding of religion and encourages us to muddy the waters, quite literally.

The phrase “muddy the waters” means to make an issue or a situation more confusing by introducing complications. And when Jesus spits on the ground and makes mud with his saliva (not Covid-friendly by the way) he is muddying the waters.

He is muddying the waters of an Honor/Shame culture that understands the world in binaries.

He is muddying the waters of what it means to observe the sabbath.

He is muddying the waters of what it means to be a rabbi and a healer and the Messiah.

We cannot engage the world as either/or because it is so much more complicated and diverse and intricate and beautiful.

My friend the Rev. Tuhina Rasche said this week, “Trans kids are lovingly and wonderfully made in the images of a gloriously diverse God.”

God is nonbinary. The world is nonbinary. And it is a false dichotomy to try and make it so.

We do not live in an honor/shame, good/evil kind of world. Life is not binary; it’s muddy. And God is found in the mud, the messiness, the muck of our lives, not in the simple boxes that we establish for ourselves and one another.

We hear in this story the truth about our God who is not afraid to get dirty. Jesus gets down in the dirt, spits, and makes mud!

We worship a God who does not run from that which is messy, but gets right there in it with us.

All too often, we try to clean things up before welcoming God into our lives. We want to put everything in its right place, make sure we have all the right words and all the right answers and then and only then is God invited to join us.

But the truth is, God is already in the messy, not to come and straighten everything out, but to be with us in the midst of the messiness.

Today, we celebrate a marriage. Amy and Alex have been through the mud and the messiness of life together already. They have experienced fear and death threats, separation and migration, and they have overcome nearly impossible obstacles to be together.

No one here needs to tell them how difficult marriage can be, that for better or for worse can entail situations we never could have even imagined because they have lived it. Their wedding day is not brought to you by the blinders of idealistic distortions. They are grounded in reality, in the solid foundation that is holy mud. And as they vow to wed one another and walk through life together, before God, their family, their friends, and this community, we witness a commitment to be transformed and healed through relationship.

Friends, the truth is: we are all broken and in need of healing in some way, both as individuals and as a society. Some of us may find that what others see as “needing healing” is just who we are and does not need to be fixed.

But the real ills of our lives are what the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once noted as the three evils of society, “racism, materialism, and militarism.”¹ What truths they still hold today!

Add to that homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, and ableism, and we’ve got a strong list of diseases from which we need healing.

In today’s gospel story, we find that healing comes from connection through mud. In other words, we are healed when relationships show up in the messiness of our lives.

When church members drop off pho for you and your family when you’ve got Covid.

When pastors show up and pray in hospital waiting rooms for you and for the baby that is coming way earlier than planned.

When your child’s pediatrician candidly and lovingly suggests you consider medication to help with what is definitely more than just the baby blues.

When your partner refuses to go to bed and sits outside that closet door as you cry in the darkness.

These are all ways that I have personally found healing through relationship in the midst of my own messiness.

I have a tendency to retreat, to sit behind closed closet doors, and to hide when I feel broken. It’s where I feel safe.

But it’s not where I find healing.

It’s only when I allow God, often embodied in other people, to sit with me in the mud that I am stuck in, and to touch and physically embrace me with connection, relationship, and love that I can get unstuck and find healing.

Nature helps, connecting with the earth, the soil, the mountains, the trees, the ocean.

But it is the act of touch, of connection, of other people, perhaps with me in nature, that is the true balm.

¹ Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in an address Delivered at the National Conference on New Politics August 31, 1967.

So how about you?

Where might you need the touch of the divine, often through other people and the elements of the earth, to open your heart, mind, soul, and body to find healing and wholeness today?

As we celebrate a marriage this morning, as we celebrate this congregation through an Annual Meeting, consider the signs of hope and healing we find through relationship, even in these muddied waters.

Today's scripture reveals the truth of a God who is willing to get dirty and join us in the mud.

Holy is the mud that allows us to feel the touch of the divine.

Thanks be to God. Amen.