

Fourth Sunday of Lent
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church Houston, Texas
15 March 2026

John 9:1-41

I told a made-up story at The Village at Gleannloch Farms that tries to describe how the various Christian denominations were born. It all has to do with the water used for Baptism, I said. There are those who believe only full immersion is biblically sound because that is what John the Baptist did to Jesus. They oppose those who believe a sprinkling of water is sufficient because the symbol is the water and not the quantity of water. Obviously, the sprinklers separated from the dunkers early on. But there were some of the sprinklers that believed the pastor needed to use his hand, rather than a dreaded shell some denominations use for baptism. The hand-only people, of course, separated from the shell-users early on, creating their own church. But then, among the hand-only group, there were some who believed only the right hand could be used for baptism because the root of the Greek word for "Right" is used for orthodoxy, the right teaching, the right belief, and even the right faith. Obviously, left-handed people were incensed and separated from the right-hand only people, creating their own group. In the meantime, among the dunkers, variations in dunking practices led to many more splits among them as well. And this is how Denominationalism was created.

In the Gospel story today we hear a number of questions. The passage opens with a question when Jesus and his disciples see a man who had been blind all his life. The disciples ask, "who sinned, this man or his parents?" We are told that the Pharisees are also with him on this day. Certainly, they knew the answer to this question. There were two theories about the relationship between sin and all sorts of maladies: the first theory says that God visits the sins of the parents on their children up to the third and fourth generation (Ex 20:5 and Dt 5:9). So, according to this view, the blind man is paying for the sins of his parents. There is a second theory, which simply says that the righteousness of the righteous is his own and the sinfulness of the wicked is his own (Ezekiel 18:20 and Jeremiah 31:29.) So, in this view, the man was paying for his own sinfulness.

Jesus has another answer. Neither! Neither this man, nor his parents sinned. He was simply born blind that God's works may be revealed. Jesus then proceeds with a behavior that has become a pattern for him in the Gospel of John. He makes a statement about himself, either by speaking about the mission of the "Son of Man", or simply by saying, "I am", and then he goes on to illustrate that statement by some action. In this case Jesus says, "As long as I am in the world, I am the

light of the world.” Then he kneels on the ground and mixes dirt with spittle, kneading together the two and then applying the mud to the man’s eyes. He then asks the man to wash in the pool of Siloam, which is reminiscent of the cleansing of Naaman in 2 Kings. After which, of course, we are told the man is cleansed.

By healing this man Jesus is challenging both the theology and the law of the day. He challenges the fact the illness is the direct result of sin, as we discussed before. Second, he challenges the laws regarding the Sabbath. According to many commentators, one of 39 actions prohibited on the Sabbath was kneading. You could not bake bread or engage in any other behavior that included the kneading or mixing of elements. Jesus not only heals on a Sabbath, which in itself is against the law, but he kneads the mud together in the presence of the Pharisees. This makes them very angry.

In the largest section of the passage, we see the episode of the legal questioning, the caginess of the blind man’s parents, the sarcasm of the blind man himself, when he asks them, “Are you too perhaps planning to become his disciples?” and finally, a second encounter between the man and Jesus, where Jesus reveals to the man that he is the “Son of Man” and the man worships him. Out of all the questions in this passage the one I empathize with the most is the question of “How.” “How did he heal you?” This is the question that divides us into denominations. How does God act in our lives today? How is the proper Baptism to be performed? How (and when) is healing to take place? How is God’s Revelation in Christ to be understood? How are we to celebrate the Sacraments and at what age? How are we to organize our corporate life as a church? How do we understand Holy Scripture? How are we to train, ordain, and supervise clergy? These “how?” questions lead to many different denominations.

I love the answer of the blind man, “I don’t know whether he is a sinner or not... all I know is that I was blind and now I see.” At the end of the day, beyond all theological positions, beyond all views of Orthodoxy, beyond all differences in religious practices... all that remains is a sinner in his absolute blindness, in his desperate condition, in his loneliness and isolation standing before Jesus, his Redeemer, the source of all light. At the end of the day, it is our experience of love, forgiveness, restoration, and healing that will bring us closer to God in Christ and closer to our brothers and sisters.

There is a message here about the mission of the Church. The one who was sent by the Father sends his disciples into the world to share our story of redemption with them. The Sent-One purifies us in the waters of baptism and then sends us out to share our story with the world. It is our personal experience of

redemption that brings others to Christ. We often get too bogged down by “marketing ploys”, sophisticated “evangelistic strategies”, and sleek “seeker programs” designed to bring more sheep into our sheep-pens. There is a lesson here to keep it simple. There is nothing more powerful than our own story.

We are called to share our conversion and redemption story with another person who may be in need of Jesus. At the end of the day, nothing is as appealing as our own story: “I once was lost and now I am found. Let me tell you about this Jesus who found me! I once was blind and now I see, let me tell you about the author of all light, the Savior of the world.” At the core of the gospel of Jesus is that all broken sinners can find solace, redemption, and restoration at the foot of the cross of God’s own son.

May he continue to bless you. Amen!