

Covenant Word

Disabled Theology

I Samuel 16:1-13; Ephesians 5:8-14; John 9:1-41

*A Message by
The Reverend Sarah
Jackson Shelton
Pastor
Sunday
March 26, 2017*

**Dear Friends,
Thank you for wanting
to read and study these
thoughts more
carefully. Please know
that I do not take full
credit for anything that
may be contained
within, because I may
have read or heard
something at some point
during my pilgrimage
and do not remember
its source and thus,
cannot give the rightful
author his/her credit. I
pray that you will find
inspiration and
encouragement.
Sarah Shelton**

Music evokes unexpected emotion doesn't it? We can hear this choir and our spirits rise to the heaven. Or after a long work day, and the car radio is playing one of your favorite songs...it can change your entire disposition, can't it? I get right sassy when The Temptations sing "My Girl," or the energy rush that Bruce Hornsby can give, or the sweet memories of escapades with my Seminary roommate when Orleans sings "You're Still the One." Melancholy can set in with James Taylor's "Carolina In My Mind," but when Ray Charles grinds out "Georgia On My Mind," oh my! I long for a wide veranda with rocking chairs and some red clay on the bottom of my bare feet.

"Georgia On My Mind" has been recorded by numerous artists, but it was not until Ray Charles' 1960 recording on *The Genius Hits the Road* album, that the song became a major hit. Not only did Ray Charles Robinson touch our lives with music, but because he was, by the age of 7, totally blind, he inspired us. His mother, Aretha, proved to be a force of will keeping him encouraged and ever achieving. She constantly challenged Ray to never let anything cripple him. She told him over and over again that he was not stupid, he was blind.

In the movie, *Ray*, there is a moment where Ray is having an argument with his wife Bea about his drug use. Bea pleads, "The only thing that can help you is God, Ray!" But Ray quickly turns on her with, "Don't you talk about God! You have any idea how it feels to go blind and still be afraid of the dark? Every day, you stand and pray just for a little light, and you don't get nothing. Cause God don't listen to people like me. ...As far as I'm concerned, me and God is even, and I can do what I please."

I wonder how many times the blind man in John's gospel felt ignored by God, because he begged for a little bit of light to shine through his darkness

only to receive nothing in return. Did he pray every day for God to listen to his pleas for a change in his circumstances, and for a chance to see the face of a loved one? Did he feel like he was forgotten, even by God, leaving him free to do as he pleased?

The disciples see him as they walk through Jerusalem with Jesus. They think consequentially, meaning: here is a blind man. His blindness must be the consequence of some deed performed by him or his parents. They say to Jesus: "So let's use this guy as our example. Where did his blindness come from? Did he sin or did his parents sin?"

Jesus begins his answer with "no one sinned." I wish that He had stopped there, but He continues to add "the man was born blind so that God's works might be revealed." Does this mean that God purposefully caused the man's blindness? Did God create a lifetime of darkness just so this fellow could have a cameo appearance in the gospel of John? Is this how and why God creates? ...so that God will look good? (Martha Spong, "Banding My Head that I may See," 4-2-11)

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When we combine Jesus' words with his act of healing, we begin to realize that Jesus means that no matter how we are born into this world – whatever particular and unique flaw we may possess because of our human condition – that God's works can still be revealed through any of us. There are no prerequisites. All are valued regardless of even such common disabilities as stubbornness or arrogance, brilliance or low functioning, far-sighted or narrow minded, physical or mental. We are all usable by God, because as God tells Samuel when he goes to anoint Israel's new king: I do not see as mortals see. They look on the outward appearance, but I look on the heart.

To add to the mystery of the gospel's story, Jesus doesn't ask the man if he wants to be healed. Neither does Jesus solicit a statement of faith. Jesus just kneels down, spits into the dirt and plasters the man's eyes with mud. The man then goes to Siloam's pool, washes, and his sight is restored. When he opens his eyes, rather than seeing the faces of those dearest to him; rather than seeing Jesus; rather than receiving a tour of



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morning at 9 a.m. and
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the city to get his bearings, he finds that people are standing in line to ask questions:

What happened to you?
How were your eyes opened?
Who did this?
How did he do it?
What do you know about your Healer?

Does it seem strange that not one person is celebrating? Not one is saying, "It's a miracle!" Not one is thanking God! Not one is curious about what it must be like to see for the first time or if there is someone or something he really wants to see. Not one is concerned that the light might hurt his eyes. Not one has called Fox 6 News. Oh, it is much easier to ask questions than to be complicit in a healing indicative of the coming Kingdom of God! (David Farmer, "Between Text and Sermon," Interpretation, pp. 59 ff) The community seems to be more intent on an inquisition than a celebration. They are more curious about Jesus' sin to heal on a Sabbath than concerned for the man himself. The miracle takes all of 2 verses. The reactive behavior by neighbors, Pharisees and family, however, goes on and on for 37 verses!

We quickly learn that the man is on his own. His family, too afraid of the Pharisees to share in their son's miracle, move into the background. They tell the Pharisees to talk only to their son not to them. Jesus and his disciples also disappear, and the larger community appears incapable of knowing the healed man as anyone but the blind beggar. They aren't even sure who he is when he shows up as a sighted person! And so, like any of us who live between Christ's coming and His coming again, the man is left to make sense out of what has happened all by himself. His seminary-trained ministers are of no help. They are too busy guarding what has been entrusted to make allowances for a blind beggar's experience of healing. So in the face of enormous opposition, this man must decide what to say and believe when, for years, all he has done is sit on the periphery of the community to beg.

I would suggest that our interest in this man is the recognition of our own faith journey, for each of us comes to a point wherein we must determine if our faith will be our own; a faith that enables us to be all of who God intends; a faith that is open to recognize others as children of God; a faith that asks us to voice our convictions that require us to stand on our own two feet. The other option, of course, is a faith that is disabling, crippling us with inherited faith from our parents and denominations, often shaped by culture rather than Jesus. It is a faith filled with such fear of change that we are only able to worship with those who think like us, look like us, smell like us, vote like us. This faith journey may be a continuum with constant movement as we grow and change, or it may become stagnant, fixed, rigid, safely boxed in. I am becoming more and more convinced that any theology that is purposefully used to limit another, that cripples and ignores another, that keeps others "in their place," that this is a disabled theology that needs the liberation from blindness to

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sight that only Jesus can give. While the Pharisees are physically whole, they possess a disabled theology. The disabled man, however, has enough vision to recognize Jesus.

We hear his liberation occur. His answers begin as one-liners: "I am the man." "He put clay on my eyes." "I washed." "I see."

The questions seem to have no end, and as if once is not enough, the Pharisees circle around for a second round of interrogation. With each encounter, the man grows in his confidence and eloquence. He gets downright sassy in his final responses, as he answers sarcastically: "Why, this is a marvel! You are so busy guarding what you understand to be possible; you cannot be pleased that God has done the impossible and made a way for me to see! (Farmer) A miracle has happened! Only God could do this! God did this through Jesus." He evolves from professing Jesus to be a man, to Jesus the prophet, to Jesus as a man come from God. More than his physical vision, the man's spiritual vision improves right alongside of his faithful understanding.

His brazenness with the Pharisees creates quite the stir. Doesn't he know that he is dealing with the fully initiated, law-abiding, pledge-paying, Bible-thumping leaders of the synagogue? They are the ones who determine whether or not a mighty act should be ascribed to God. They know everything. They know God does not work on the Sabbath. They know that Moses is God's only spokesperson. They even know that anyone born blind has to be a sinner just as anyone who breaks the Sabbath is a sinner too. And we all know that God doesn't work through sinners! Right? (Wrong!)

These consummate insiders, the Pharisees, let their fear take over. It is fear that their well-established routine is being disrupted and discredited. Their fear is that this healing is not of God. Their fear is that they will be found negligent in guarding what has been entrusted to them. Their fear is that of being wrong and this keeps them from knowing the Light of the world. This man, who once was blind but now can see, is such a threat that

they throw him out! They excommunicate him. They remove him from the membership role. They stop his dangerous testimony in order to reject what didn't fit their conventional pattern of

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maintaining the way it has always been. It leaves us to wonder who is really blind in this story.

This week, you were well represented by Fisher Humphreys, Ann Elizabeth McInvale, Daniel Ingram, Drexel Rayford, and Frank McCrory at a Cooperative Baptist Fellowship meeting for a select group of Alabama pastors. The subject matter was the work of The Illumination Committee of which I have already told you a little. National CBF, under new leadership, is trying to improve a hiring statement that specifically states no actively practicing homosexual will be hired by CBF. They would like to make this shift in such a way that no one church feels that a line is being drawn in the sand and, therefore, forced to make a choice between staying within the fellowship of CBF or not.

I think, sometimes, because we have worked hard for these past 20 to 25 years to create a welcoming and affirming atmosphere here at BCOC, we forget that others are just now coming to this conversation about sexuality and gender. Opinions were clear, however, on Tuesday afternoon. First Baptist, Huntsville has already taken a church vote that allows LGBTQ to join their church but they will not be ordained as a deacon, teach Sunday School, or have their marriages take place in the sacred space of the sanctuary in which they worship every week. Another church, just over the Shelby County line, clearly stated that should the National statement be written as more open and welcoming that they will pull out of CBF.

After sitting among the Pharisees, I often come away frustrated, sad, needled by anxiety. I do battle with the recurring reality that to witness for truth is lonely. If it doesn't gently separate you from the mainstream, then you get thrown out of the church with the doors slammed behind you. I am not alone here! We have all been there at one time or another. At those times, I start asking questions about all the ways we opt for blindness rather than sight. This doesn't just happen in church, but it happens in all of our relationships. Try putting the spotlight on your relationship with your beloved, or your parents or your children. We would rather stay blind to the ways we share so little of ourselves with our friends and so often stay stuck in jobs that are dull and unfulfilling but safely predictable. We like to believe what is convenient, and stay away from what will stir the pot so that we can keep peace. We guard our pride and remain uninformed, hidden in the figurative dark. ("Jesus and The Man Who Was Born Blind," The Collected Sermons of William Sloane Coffin, VL 2, pp 516-520)

He is taken in by the love and Light of Christ's compassion. My friends, Jesus will not pass us by either. Wherever we are blind, Christ desires our healing so that we are also characterized by new life.

And so the Pharisees of this day and of John's gospel combine in my head and force me to ask myself: How often do I banish

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the truth because I am too tied to my safe conventions? How often is the creative movement of Spirit stifled because I am more comfortable with manageable, under control, sensible, logical, and explainable events? (Walter Brueggemann, "Do You Want to Join the Miracle?" Collected Sermons) Do I miss the Light of the world because I know how it should be done; because I am so convinced of my convictions, my duties, my interpretations, my

responsibilities? When I fail to be receptive, when I refuse to give a blessing to another's happiness, when I am begrudging of a miracle of sight or even insight...oh, when we are white-knuckled from guarding some precious belief; when we are puffed up with righteousness about how much better it is to be a moderate, yea, even a liberal; when we are convinced of how another has mistreated us; when we are so certain that our vision is clouded, we must ask: Am I blind also?

The one thing the Pharisees had not counted on was that the man did not ask to be healed. He is taken in by the love and Light of Christ's compassion. My friends, Jesus will not pass us by either. Wherever we are blind, Christ desires our healing so that we are also characterized by new life. We watch the man in John's gospel, who is now filled with the Light of Christ's love, become a person who is completely beyond the religious leaders' censorship. He is beyond returning to a world of darkness defined by judgment and exclusion, because he chooses life. He chooses light. He chooses love. He chooses a theology that enables him to be all that God intends. The man simply replies, "Lord, I believe," and the celebration, at last, breaks out as he worships Jesus, the Messiah, who heals him of his blindness.

Ray Charles was never healed of his blindness, but his music, popularized during the Civil Rights' Movement, did help open the eyes of others. In Augusta, Georgia, protestors lined up to meet his tour bus. They were standing outside a venue that was willing to present Ray Charles and his band – all blacks – but wherein the main floor audience would be all white. The African American ticket holders were restricted to the balcony. The protestors held signs that read "No More Segregation!" They pled with Ray to cancel the show. His initial response was: "That's just how it is. This is Georgia. We all play Jim Crow down here." But as he thought further, as he heard his own words, as the eyes of his soul received sight, Ray put his band back on the bus, and refused to play. Headlines, everywhere, carried the story. He was sued and the city of Augusta banished him from ever playing in their city again. But in April of 1979, the state legislature of Georgia made a public apology to Ray Charles Robinson, and they officially adopted his hit song, "Georgia On My Mind," as the state's song.

We know of song of healing too:

"I once was lost, but now am found...was blind, but now I see."

May it be so, dear Lord. Amen.