



De-Escalating the Gaslit Powder Keg

John 9:1-41

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Have you heard the ticking of the clock?

Like the croc from Peter Pan, though you may not know from where it is coming, if you listen closely enough, you can almost hear the tick ... tock ... tick ... tock ... tick ... tock ... and if we wait just long enough, we'll realize that it's not the ticking of a clock, but the countdown timer on a societal bundle of TNT. It is just a matter of time before the explosion goes off.

I am being somewhat facetious, but at the same time, there are days when it feels like society is just a large gaslit powder keg, and we're all just waiting for things to *really* explode. Everyone seems uptight with strong opinions about what's right and what's wrong – about who's right and who's wrong. And yes, I think we in the church – or at least those who call themselves Christian – are perhaps among the most tightly wound up of us all.

We have public officials who seem bent on starting war with everyone about everything. We have whole denominations, not unlike our own, that are literally falling apart and splitting into even more isolated echo chambers. We have families who can't sit at the same table with one another for a holiday meal. And that's just my life – I'm not sure what yours is like.

In the midst of a society that seems to be at each other's throats on almost every issue, it would sure be helpful if we had some guidance from God as to how we might de-escalate such heightened tensions.

Which leads me to our rather lengthy story from the gospel of John this morning.

It is uncommon for us to use an entire chapter of any book of the Bible as our focus scripture on Sunday morning, but this chapter is uncommon compared to most of the Gospel text. This story is one of the only places where we see the response of those around an individual who receives the healing of God through Christ. In a few stories, like that of the Gerasene Demoniac and the Samaritan Woman at the Well, we do hear about the individual going off to proclaim the goodness of God in their local town, but even in those stories, we don't know anything about the individual interactions that took place. Here, we have both the healing story and the full recollection of follow up conversations that took place in the greater communal context.

As is common in the Gospel witness, it is the privileged and most well educated of Church leaders who are receiving the brunt of the Biblical criticism in this narrative. The Pharisees that took exception to Jesus' healing on the Sabbath, who by the end of this chapter are simply referred to as "the Jews," are

some of the most Biblically astute members of the Jewish community; they are part of the temple leadership. If I were trying to liken the Pharisees to our modern experience, I would say they are similar to today's specialized ministers of discipleship, perhaps ministers of spiritual formation, and certainly scholars and theologians who specialize in Biblical knowledge. These are the kinds of people you turn to when you want to know what to do given the Biblical witness on a specific topic or regarding a specific situation. They are the experts of the religious community on tradition and scripture.

I think it's important to know just how righteous the Pharisees thought themselves to be to really grasp the weight of this story. And perhaps we should note that it wasn't just the Pharisees who thought highly of themselves, the greater Jewish community thought highly of the Pharisees too. These were highly esteemed individuals, who were given power and authority over Jewish life, culture, and community. If we wanted to highlight the religious patriarchy with just one occupational identity, the Pharisees would be at the top of that list. They weren't just scholars of the past, they were part of the religious order that maintained the status quo at any given time. They held the authority of what was and wasn't acceptable, and as we see even in this text, they held the power to kick someone out of the community should that person go against the *Pharisee's* understanding of right and wrong.

While the Pharisees were an actual group of people who held a specific role and position within the life of the religious community, as we read the scripture, we should not limit our understanding of John's critique of the Pharisees to only those who hold such an official job title or salaried position today. At the time, it was *very* uncommon that anyone outside the class of Pharisees would hold such a weighty opinion regarding Scripture. The Pharisees were among the few who were educated enough to read, and as the printing press did not yet exist, there weren't copies of the Hebrew Scriptures lying around for general consumption. If you wanted to know what the Scripture said or meant, you had no choice but to listen to the teachings of the temple elders. That was the way the religious and communal life was structured.

Today, with multiple hundreds of translations of the Biblical text available by simply picking up your phone and typing [www \(dot\) ...](#) we have all kinds of self-taught and echo-chamber educated Pharisees in our society. The critique of this text is no longer limited to those who hold salaried or tenured teaching roles in the church or our seminaries. The critique that is being offered should be understood as applying to *anyone* who believes themselves to hold a definite or concrete knowledge of God, God's laws, and God's desires for humanity. If you believe yourself educated enough so as to criticize another's beliefs, thoughts, actions, life-style, occupations, or family situation – you are likely among those at the arrow's end of John's critique in this text. Though we often like to think of ourselves as one of the disciples of Jesus who are sitting by and observing the story, we should, more often than not, view ourselves as the ones being criticized for being overly zealous or unwilling to be corrected by Jesus' teachings.

Let's look back to the text.

John informs us that there is a man who has been blind since birth. We do not know how old the man was, but we would do well to remember that adulthood in the first century was not reserved for those 18 and older. One was considered old enough to marry and carry the weight of adulthood as early as

their first teenage years, around 13 or 14. That the man's parents are both still living indicates that this man couldn't have been *that* old, as the average life expectancy was just 50 – 60 years old. So, at most, this man is in his early 30s, but, understanding averages, it's more likely that he's in his late teens, or early 20s.

The disciples asked Jesus, "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

This question gives us some helpful insight into the lack of scientific knowledge of those living in the first-century middle east. This man's blindness is assumed to be a spiritual punishment, the result of sinning against God. It is not a question of what caused his blindness, the question is *who* was responsible? Did the parents sin prior to his birth? Or did he, perhaps in utero, somehow offend the Lord?

Jesus indicates that neither sinned, but that his blindness was intentional so that God's works might be revealed in him.

Admittedly, I'm not a huge fan of Jesus's response any more than I am the disciples' question. Are we to assume that God intentionally birthed this man blind so that this specific moment of revelation might come about? There are certainly many who would claim such a theological belief. I prefer to liken Jesus' answer to Paul's statement in Romans 8:28, which claims that God can work good in all things – even the things that may cause one to be singled out as different, or may cause one to be challenged when surrounded by a majority-sighted population. God can work good even in the midst of this man's suffering, but that doesn't mean God choose for him to suffer for so many years.

In whatever way we choose to receive Jesus' response, his answer rejects the idea that this blindness was the result of anyone's sin. The man is blind; that is just a fact of what is.

Jesus then mixes his saliva with some dirt to make mud, and spreads that mud on the man's eyes. Jesus tells him to go wash in the Pool of Siloam. The Pool of Siloam has been discovered through archaeological digs. It is a massive pool, almost 200 meters long with steps into the pool on all sides, located just below the Jerusalem temple. It would have been a *miqveh*, which was a pool for ritual immersion and cleansing before one entered the temple.ⁱ

The man does as Jesus says, and as he comes back from the pool, we're told he is able to see. I'd like to note that as the man comes back from the pool, he has not physically *seen* Jesus. Had he been listening to the disciples speaking with Jesus previously, he may have known that Jesus was a rabbi, because the disciples called him such. But the man doesn't *know* Jesus.

The neighbors who had been present prior to his encounter with Jesus are baffled by his new found sight. In fact, they're so confused by his sight that they don't even think it's the same man. "It is someone like him," they suggest, but not him.

Can you imagine having grown up in a community, having been on the street every day begging for support – which the text indicates he had – only to be unrecognizable by the people around you, the

people who had seen you every day for how many years, simply because you now have the ability to see? ... The man insisted that he was, indeed, the same man, but they did not believe him.

And their disbelief lights the fuse on the powder keg.

They were incapable of acknowledging their own failure to see, and so they took the man before the Pharisees. Something's up, something's different, and so we're going to take this man to our religious and cultural authorities to figure out what's going on.

The Pharisees began to ask how it was he received his sight, and then they go super defensive. They said, "This man," that is, the man who put mud on your eyes, "he is not from God, for he does not observe the Sabbath." There were some dissenters among them who issued a minority opinion, saying, "How could such a man perform such signs if he was a sinner?" They were divided, and so they asked more questions to determine if the man who had healed him was really of God or not.

Tension is building. Again, something is out of the ordinary, and they are not comfortable with it.

The Pharisees ask the man, "What do you say about him, he who opened your eyes?" Keep in mind, the now-sighted man does not *know* Jesus. He can only say so much about him, because he has never physically *seen* Jesus. But, Jesus gave him sight, so he knows Jesus is no ordinary man. So the man responds, "He is a prophet." ... The plot thickens, and the room gets even more tense. The title "prophet" is not something you just throw around in the Jerusalem temple. To be a prophet puts you on the same pedestal as Elisha, Isaiah, and Jeremiah. That's high praise, and it calls into question the Pharisees' authority. If there is a prophet around, who needs a Pharisee?

The fuse is burning fast.

The Pharisees are so worked up that they expand their list of witnesses; they call in the man's parents. "Is this your son," they ask? "Was he born blind? If so, how does he now see?"

The parents all but evoked the fifth. "This is our son, and yes, he was born blind. But we don't know how he can see now. Ask him." John clues us in to their fear: "they were afraid of the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be out of the synagogue." Anyone put out of the synagogue was effectively excommunicated from the community, because in the life of Israel, the synagogue was the central convener of community.

The Pharisees are so worried about Jesus, they are so stuck in their own way of thinking and believing, they're so stuck in their own way of understanding God's will, that they're willing to tear apart the community and isolate members of their own families to enforce their way of thinking.

The Pharisees invited the newly-sighted man back before them to question him again. They want more details on their vendetta against Jesus.

This may be one of my new favorite lines in the whole of the Biblical text. The Pharisees ask, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?” And the man responds, “I have already told you. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?”

The tone of the man’s voice sells this text. Can you imagine with me that he’s asking with honest intrigue? “Do you also wish to become his disciples?”

But alas, no. The Pharisees are stuck in their own way of thinking, that they refuse, saying, “You may be his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses.” ... Evidently, one can’t be both?

The man responds one last time to the Pharisees, “Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If he were not from God, he could do nothing.”

And the Pharisees offer one final response as the powder keg goes off, “You were born entirely in sins, and you are trying to teach us?” And they drove him out. The community was broken; the man was kicked out.

Never did the Pharisees approach this man with any honest or genuine curiosity as to how he was healed or any honest intrigue about the man behind his healing. The entirety of this story revolves around the Pharisees being concerned with their own authority and power, and in such a fear, their attempt to gain information that would confirm their already skewed perspective of Jesus as a sinner and a *false* prophet.

Nowhere in this story is the man’s new found sight celebrated. Nowhere is this man’s future acknowledged – is it not appreciated that he will be able to move beyond the societal limitations of that time for a blind person, who will no longer have to beg for food or money. Nowhere does anyone in the community rejoice with him or his parents for this unexpected change of circumstance.

It is only Jesus, who shows back up at the end, who acknowledges the joy of being able to see anew. And even Jesus in his interaction is celebrating the man’s ability to see *him as Lord* more than the man’s ability to see the world.

We live in a world that is run by Pharisaic wannabes, who are convinced they are right on all things religious, societal, governmental, and cultural. Our church – our denomination – is literally in the midst of a global reckoning because of Pharisees who believe they hold the keys to God’s perfect truth. Our society feels like a ticking time bomb as we struggle to figure out who *really* understands the “right” path forward.

And Jesus goes along, giving sight to the blind, dining with those believed to be sinful, teaching us to accept that God is greater than our limited understanding, and gathering up those who have been driven out of the church by “righteous” temple leaders.

In the midst of the tension, what the man needed – what so many people still need today – is a place to belong that will work for and celebrate our liberation. What we need is people who are willing to cultivate a calming presence where we might allow ourselves to be corrected, renewed, and rejoined as one body, as one people, as one fellowship centered and focused on the powerful presence of Christ.

In this season of Lent, may our eyes be opened that we may see anew, and that we might join in the joyful life-giving love of Christ who is the light of the world, who teaches us to be the presence of grace and mercy in the midst of a tense and explosive world. May it be so. Amen.

ⁱ Marianne Meye Thompson. *John: The New Testament Library*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015.