

# On the Road to Healing: Disability and Healing

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### NPMC, March 12, 2023, Lent 3

**Scripture: John 9:1-17**

**Hymns: VT 644 - Healer of Our Every Ill and VT 527 - Bless the Arms That Comfort**

**John 9:1-17, NRSV:**

As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. <sup>2</sup> His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” <sup>3</sup> Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. <sup>4</sup> We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work. <sup>5</sup> As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” <sup>6</sup> 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, <sup>7</sup> saying to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. <sup>8</sup> 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?” <sup>9</sup> Some were saying, “It is he.” Others were saying, “No, but it is someone like him.” He kept saying, “I am he.” <sup>10</sup> But they kept asking him, “Then how were your eyes opened?” <sup>11</sup> 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.” <sup>12</sup> They said to him, “Where is he?” He said, “I do not know.”

<sup>13</sup> They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. <sup>14</sup> Now it was a Sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. <sup>15</sup> 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.” <sup>16</sup> Some of the Pharisees said, “This man is not from God, for he does not observe the Sabbath.” Others said, “How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?” And they were divided. <sup>17</sup> 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.”

As you may know, our Women’s Bible Study group has been making its way through the Gospel of John this year. When it was my turn to lead, I must admit, I went down a bit of a rabbit hole of researching disability theologies and interpretations of the healing stories in John. Now if you haven’t heard of disability theology, this branch of theology that looks at the Bible and faith from the perspective of those who live with various disabilities – something I’m quite interested in personally. One of the key books is *The Disabled God* by Nancy Eiesland, which focuses on how the risen Jesus still bore marks of crucifixion; at the centre of the Christian faith, there is a disabled AND sacred body.

Now in looking at the Gospel of John, disability theologian Jamie Clark-Soles starts with redefining several words for us. First off, she distinguishes between an “impairment” (a physiological or medical condition that may limit one’s mobility, etc.) and a “disability” (a social or communal issue; in her words, “when a society refuses to

ensure all of its people have equal access to the benefits of that society – education, transportation, employment, architecture that can be navigated”). So for her, “disabling” is something that is done to people; for instance, “Jesus’ opponents routinely disable him and accuse him of having a demon” as they try to place obstacles in the way of his ministry.

Secondly, she doesn’t speak about people with disabilities vs. “able-bodied” people. Rather, she calls the latter “temporarily able-bodied” – a reminder that even for those who are currently “able-bodied” and do not have physical impairments, their abilities and mobility will naturally change with age and other life circumstances.

Finally, Clark-Soles differentiates between a cure (“elimination of impairment,” which is individual) and healing (“a person who has experienced integration and reconciliation to self, God, and the community”). Importantly, for the book of John, healing “may or may not involve a cure.” This resonates with the reflections in our Lenten Devotional for this week from Donna and Irvin Driedger, whom you just heard, as well as Don Klaassen. Don helps us think through what this distinction means when it comes to Jesus’ miraculous healing stories in the Bible. He wrote,

the immediacy and fullness of the healings portrayed in those stories has created the expectation that this should be the kind of miracle that is available to anyone who has enough faith. The implication of this interpretation of Jesus’ healings for someone with a disability who does not receive a similar “cure” may be a choice between believing that there is something wrong or sinful about them, or that the idea of a God who cares for them is a myth. A lot of pain and despair comes from limiting ourselves to this false dichotomy.<sup>1</sup>

So, with these new definitions in mind, let’s turn to our story from John 9.

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<sup>1</sup> From: Don Klaassen, “Lent Week 3 – Healing and Disability” in *On the Road to Healing: Lenten Devotional*, Nutana Park Mennonite Church, 2023.

Now this narrative begins with Jesus helpfully busting one of the myths that has caused a lot of pain for people with impairments over the millennia: the idea that impairments are caused by sin. So Jesus' disciples see a man who was born blind, and ask Jesus, "Who sinned, this man or his parents?" They take this connection between sin and in this case, blindness, so much for granted, that they just ask him whose sin it was. They don't ask whether this man's blindness is connected to sin at all! The first part of Jesus' response blows this assumption out of the water: "Neither this man nor his parents sinned." It's as simple as that! Impairments like blindness are not a matter of sin or being somehow smited by God. Morality doesn't even factor in here.

But the second half of Jesus' answer again creates some discomfort. Jesus says, "He was born blind so that so that God's works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work." Returning to Clark-Soles, she wholeheartedly approves with Jesus disconnecting sin and disability, but finds this second part troubling. It seems to suggest that God wanted to make this man blind just to show off God's glory – in Clark-Soles's words, to use him as "a prop in a divine magic show."<sup>2</sup> This makes God seem fickle, if not downright cruel. It seems we've solved one problem while creating another.

But then Clark-Soles returns to the original Greek and points out something really important. A phrase has been added to this verse, John 9:3-4, which changes the meaning. The original Greek, remember, does not have punctuation, so translators have to figure out the sentences in other ways. In the original of this passage, the words "he was born blind" do not appear; they've been added. So the original sentence reads:

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<sup>2</sup> Jaime Clark Soles, "Disability and the Johannine Literature," Video, 1:01:39, published March 22, 2016, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gNEQsgorCmU&ab\\_channel=CollaborativeonFaithandDisability](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gNEQsgorCmU&ab_channel=CollaborativeonFaithandDisability)

“Neither this man nor his parents sinned. So that God’s works might be revealed in him, we must work the works of him who sent me while it is day.” That’s quite different, isn’t it! It changes the whole theology of this verse, from viewing God as the one who caused this impairment to the one in whom God is revealed. And it’s up to us to figure out in what way God’s work is revealed in this man. As Clark-Soles states, in this conversation, “Jesus turns this from an academic exercise (among the disciples) in figuring out who caused the blindness (which doesn’t change it) to the person sitting in front of them.” But the questions remain: “What is the work of God in this story? Who actually needs healing? Is it healing the blindness or this whole system?”<sup>3</sup> And this is when Jesus mixes spit and mud and then asks the man to wash in the Temple pool and he becomes able to see.

Now the rest of the story consists of different reactions to the healing. First we have the townspeople, who had reduced the man to his blindness to such an extent that some don’t even recognize him after his cure! Then we have the Pharisees, who set about investigating this miracle. They question the man, who describes his healing and calls Jesus a prophet. Beyond our passage, they question his parents, then the man again, whom they kick out of the Temple when he insists that Jesus is from God. The chapter ends with Jesus meeting the man and speaking in almost a riddle. Jesus says he was sent “so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind” (v. 39). There is a great reversal here, and a questioning of who really is blind or in need of healing: the man who recognizes Jesus’ prophetic words and actions, Jesus’ act of restoration in welcoming this man back from the margins to which he had

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<sup>3</sup> Clark-Soles video.

been relegated; or the Pharisees, who kick him out of the Temple, try to banish him to the margins, to disable him again.

So where is the work of God in this story? Is it in the healing itself? Interestingly, Clark-Soles concludes that the “cure” itself becomes secondary here. There are only a few healing stories in John’s Gospel, and another one is in John 5, which provides a real contrast to the man’s response in John 9. There, the man is “cured” but goes right back to sitting in the Temple, back to his old ways on the margins. There is a “cure” but no “healing” – no transformation of his life or reintegration into the community, or into following Jesus’ Way. So at the end of the day, taken with John 5, John 9 isn’t trying to say that if you have great faith you can be cured.<sup>4</sup> Rather, the man’s response to Jesus, the healing of the man’s sense of self and of belonging, the man’s courage in standing up to the Pharisees: these are where the healing happens in this story!

Don Klaassen puts it this way:

Are we able to rethink our theology to allow for the acceptance of brokenness in our world, and that healing may come in different forms? Maybe the power in those stories from the gospels goes beyond the miracle, to the example Jesus provides of recognizing the value of each life and ensuring people are loved rather than marginalized. When we follow this example there will be healing in ways that go beyond what we can see.

Or, as Donna and Irvin put it, for them, “healing is a process – it is truly miraculous but not instantaneous.”<sup>5</sup> These are more ordinary miracles.

So healing happens to us and around us as the obstacles that disable are dismantled. The work of organizations like Hope and Healing International, which

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<sup>4</sup> Clark-Soles video.

<sup>5</sup> Above two quotes from Don Klaassen and Donna and Irvin Driedger, “Lent Week 3 – Healing and Disability” in *On the Road to Healing: Lenten Devotional*, Nutana Park Mennonite Church, 2023.

focuses particularly on children with disabilities who live in poverty, or SaskAbilities,<sup>6</sup> just down the street here, which provides equipment and services for various needs, are two examples of what that looks like. As we participate in this dismantling of disability, may all of us, whether we live with impairments or are temporarily able-bodied, find hope in following Jesus, our wounded healer. AMEN

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<sup>6</sup> See <https://hopeandhealing.org/> and <https://www.saskabilities.ca/>