



Believers in the Word Full Gospel Ministry
Savannah, Georgia

DISABILITY AWARENESS

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

See today's Worship Unit for a comprehensive list of ways to assist persons in your congregation who have disabilities.

Sunday, October 10, 2010

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Lection - John 9:1-41 (Key Verses 1-12) (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 1) As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. (v. 2) His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (v. 3) Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. (v. 4) We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. (v. 5) As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." (v. 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,

(v. 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. (v. 8) The neighbours and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, “Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?” (v. 9) Some were saying, “It is he.” Others were saying, “No, but it is someone like him.” He kept saying, “I am the man.” (v. 10) But they kept asking him, “Then how were your eyes opened?” (v. 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.” (v. 12) They said to him, “Where is he?” He said, “I do not know.”

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Disability Awareness Day is a day to celebrate throughout the church calendar year. How does one become sensitized, mobilized, and spiritualized to go forth and spread the Kingdom of God by allowing all of our African American churches to become inclusive to person with disabilities, demonstrating that we are the “Body of Christ?”

For too many years, African American churches have turned their heads and hearts and closed their eyes to people with disabilities. The American Disability Act, which was passed in 1990, defines what it means to have a disability under the law.¹ However, the agenda I call our attention to on this blessed day is not one mandated by a governmental law but one mandated by God. African Americans who are disabled, who are a part of our families and communities, should be invited to become “whole” and thoroughly included in all aspects of our churches. I am referring to those who suffer from: blindness, deafness, lameness, mental illness, depression, and other such impairments from which they experience oppression, alienation, and being considered as outsiders. However, of all the disabilities, named and unnamed, the most often overlooked in our churches are the disabled who are deaf and hard of hearing. They are the “Silent Disabled” because one cannot visually look at them and detect their impairment. This lectionary moment serves as a great opportunity for those without disabilities who claim Christ as Lord to listen to the deaf afresh and to hear their needs just as Jesus heard the needs of the man in our text.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: John 9:1-41 (Key Verses 1-12)

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

Throughout the course of history, persons who were disabled have often been tortured, ignored, exploited and at times, left alone to beg as this blind man had to do. In more recent years, the handicapped have been pitied, sometimes cared for, and gradually accepted in many instances. Jesus drew attention to this population through his teachings. As a result, Christian churches in the western world accepted the plight of persons with disabilities as one of charitable causes. This view of persons with disabilities held that they were the “deserving poor.”

I grew up in a Baptist faith community in the state of North Carolina where we lived as ones who “worked while it was day.” We were busy, the young and old, lending a helping hand, reassuring all the haves and have-nots, the able and the disabled, the blind and the sighted, deaf and hearing, that the same Jesus who opened the eyes of the man born blind is the same Jesus who is able to do anything but fail. This same Jesus, who is the “Light of the World,” sent new light into the Delaware Valley, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 1976. On April 12 of that year, God broke down a barrier for many who had been held in bondage, and a newly organized church opened its doors to the deaf and hard of hearing and mainstreamed them with the hearing. Two African American female teachers, deaf persons, parents and community leaders, took God’s mandate seriously and

accepted God's marching orders to "Go." They obeyed the command and did as the man in our text. The Society for Helping Church was formed. The mission and mandate of Society for Helping Church is to make people whole by teaching them how to achieve through the P.I.E.S.S. process – which advocates physical, intellectual, emotional, social, and above all spiritual wholeness.²

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

As I read and re-read this biblical recorded by the Apostle John, I was captivated by all of the precious theological and sociological gems revealed through this one miracle. Theology asks: Who is God? In this passage, we clearly see that God, through Christ, is one who cares about the disabled. Sociology asks: What is our condition and/or challenge? In this text, a man is challenged by a disability and a society that is unconcerned with his wholeness. John centers his discourses largely on Jesus, his relationship to God, and his necessity to bring light to those who are blind.

Today's text has as part of its backdrop John 8:12 in which Christ claimed that he was the light of the world. In John 9, he demonstrates this. It continues in John 10:26, which indicates something of the ruckus caused by the miracle and the miracle worker. There is no recorded date for the miracle, but the ensuing controversy comes to a head during the Feast of Dedication in chapter 10, and the entire story may fall between the period of that feast.

The miracle begins with Jesus walking through Jerusalem (the holy city) with his disciples and seeing a man whom the text says was blind from birth. There is a distinct difference in one born with a disability than one who experiences a disability later in life. One born with a disability may assume that this is his or her lot for life. This can lead to a state of perpetual self-pity or can lead one to find ways to maneuver in the world in spite of their disability. Those who experience a disability later in life may find it harder to restrain themselves to act as whole persons in a world largely inhabited by the physically abled.

Jesus' disciples asked him who sinned, this man or his parents. We are aware from the Old Testament that the parent's sins can affect their children (Exodus 20:5). However, Jesus, who was always ushering in new ways of seeing the world, offers that this man's plight has nothing to do with anyone sinning. Amazingly, he says that this man was born blind "so that God's work might be revealed in him" (v. 3). Try wrapping your brain around that. Imagine God giving you a disability so that the works of God could be revealed in you! This man had gone from childhood to manhood blind so that God's work could be revealed. Clearly, we cannot fathom the mind of God. Through this man's blindness (disability), Jesus is being led by God to demonstrate that he is indeed the Light of the World.

In this same way, God has allowed his work to be revealed to the deaf through manual language (signing) so that God might be glorified through their hand praise.³

The disciples first focus on sin. Once Jesus flips that script and discusses what he came to do, he then makes a communal announcement to all who are his followers: "We must work the works of him who sent me." This is the theme throughout this miracle story. We must work now. "Faith, if it has not works, is dead, being alone." James 2:20. Jesus includes his disciples in the work, and he includes us, too. The invitation is given for us to work along with the Master doing the work of God to bring light to a dark world in every way required. There is urgency in his words. We **must** work "while it is day; night is coming when no man can work." We all have an opportunity to glorify God through our works of faith regardless of our circumstances; God can use us for his

glory! Ask Moses with his slowness of speech, (Ex. 4:10); ask Zacchaeus, a man of little stature (Luke 19:3); or Paul with his thorn in his flesh (2 Cor. 12:7). Ask the Silent Choir at Society Church, with their deafness, still singing to the glory of God. Work as long as it is day for night is coming. Our Lord's moments on earth were rapidly coming to an end; we do not know how long we have, but we do know that at some point "night is coming." Whatever we can do to assist persons with disabilities, we need to do it today.

In verse six the miracle begins. Our Lord turns toward the blind man to heal him. He spits on the ground and mixes mud with his saliva; this was not an uncommon medicinal practice in the ancient world. I believe that this act alludes to the biblical image of God as the potter and human beings as clay. This story illustrates the truth revealed in the prologue of John's gospel that Jesus, the Logo, the Word, is the one through whom all things are molded.

Jesus took the man and anointed his eyes saying, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam (which means Sent)" (v. 12). John interprets the word Siloam as "sent." More will be said about the significance of this interpretation shortly. The name Siloam most likely originally applied to Hezekiah's aqueduct which allowed the water of Gihon, outside Jerusalem's walls, to flow into the city to sustain life in the city. And when the man obeyed, he received his sight. A verse from a song comes to mind, "Amazing Grace – how sweet the sound – that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see!"⁴ With this miracle, as he did with all miracles involving persons having disabilities (whether it be seeing, hearing, or others), Jesus takes time to establish personal communication so as to assure the individual of his presence and establish a formula for their faith to increase or appear. In this connection, we cannot overlook another theme in this text—obedience. The healing was not effected until the man obeyed Jesus' command: "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam." Faith does not increase or is not received by any outside of a relationship with the Savior and without obedience.

In the remaining portions of today's focus, verses (8-12), we notice that the emphasis of the "beloved disciple's" gospel is that Jesus is the one sent by the Father. Now we are back to that word "sent." At a pool which John said mean sent, Jesus tells that he was sent to do the will of his Father. Then he sent his disciples to work and now he is sending us to continue his mission. Hopefully, this will not be lost on us the next time that we encounter a disabled person who may need assistance or may need to be included.

The blind beggar was asked four times in the story how he came to have his sight; clearly this was an unusual occurrence. Everyone had a take on what had happened. Some said, "he was the man born blind," the beggar, while others stated, no, "he looked like him." But the blind man said, "I am the man," I am the disabled blind beggar who by faith, Jesus healed and also gave me spiritual sight. This coming to faith is the crucial theme of this story. Jesus never does anything halfway. Now the man has his physical and spiritual sight. Indeed, "I once was blind, but now I see."

Celebration

We celebrate that God has chosen each of us to live as true disciples of Jesus, always witnessing of his Kingship. We know from experience that he is truly the one sent from God to be the light of the world. He came not for one but to bring abundant life to all; he provides accessibility to salvation and to grace. As his hands, eyes, feet and voice in the world today we celebrate our new awareness of what we can do to aide and include the disabled. We know that night is coming and we don't want to be caught with our work undone.

Description Details

The descriptive details of this passage include:

Sounds: The water flowing swiftly through the aqueducts of the Pool of Siloam; the splashing of the water as the man washed and was made whole; the murmuring of the crowd as to who the man was and how the miracle happened; and

Sights: Jesus seeing the blind man; God's works being revealed; the mud being smeared with saliva and spread on the man's eyes; the man stepping into the pool; and the man's reaction to receiving his sight (see the shock on his face; the tears in his eyes; the movement of his body) as he celebrates.

III. Additional Comments or Suggestions for a Sermon on Disability Awareness Day

A HAND

There's beauty in the way a hand
Can carve a word in air,
There's beauty in the way a hand
Can give lift to a prayer,
There's beauty in the way a hand
Can trace a song in space,
There's beauty in the way a hand
Can light a deaf child's face.
Though, we can't hear the spoken word
Or leaves rustling on a tree,
We can hear the beauty
of a word that we can see.

There's beauty in the way a hand
Can make the things you say
Seem soft as rain, hard as stone,
And clear and bright as day.
The spoken word can't do these things,
But words in signs can be
More vivid and more meaningful,
For they're something we can see.

Alice "Tina" Hawkins
Graduate of Gallaudet College
- 2006⁵

IV. A Resource for Pastors and Christian Educators to Assist the Deaf

Hairston, Ernest, and Smith Linwood, Black And Deaf in America. Silver Springs, MD: J. J. Publishers, Inc., 1983.

Additional Books, Articles, and Audio Resources

The following list was developed by Michelle Riley Jones, Lectionary Team Liturgist

- (a) “Gospel Accountability: When Can Special Needs Adults Understand the Gospel?” by Gene Nabi. *This article addresses the issue of salvation for people with severe disabilities.*
- (b) “Images of God Through the Lens of Disability.” By Jane S. Deland
- (c) That All May Worship: An Interfaith Welcome to People with Disabilities. By Ginny Thornburgh and Ann Rose Davie
- (d) Loving Justice: The ADA and the Religious Community. National Organization on Disability. *This is a religious participation guide.*
- (e) Helping Kids Include Kids with Disabilities. By Barbara Newman
- (f) Including People with Disability in Faith Communities (A Guide for Service Providers, Families, & Congregations). By Erik W. Carter
- (g) “Encountering the Disabled God.” By Nancy L. Eisland
- (h) Unexpected Guests at God’s Banquet: Welcoming People with Disabilities into the Church. By Brett Webb-Mitchell
- (i) Disability Included! A Model for Church Communities. By Wayne Morris
- (j) From Barriers to Bridges: A Community Action Guide for Congregations and People with Disabilities. By Janet Miller Rife and Ginny Thornburgh
- (k) “Fear Not the Disabled.” This editorial first appeared in the November 2005 issue of Christianity Today.
- (l) “Through the Roof,” is a ministry of Joni (Ereckson Tada) and friends located in Ohio that provides free audio and pamphlet resources for starting or expanding a disability ministry. Online location: www.throughtheroofministries.org.

Notes

1. “What is the ADA: Definition of Disability?” National Institute on Disability And Rehabilitation Research. Richmond, VA. Online location: www.adata.org/whatsada-definition.aspx accessed 3 January 2010
2. Society for Helping Church. Online location: www.societyforhelping.org accessed 3 January 2010
3. “April’s Big Idea: Ministering to People with Disabilities and Special Needs.” The African American Lectionary. Online location: <http://www.theafricanamericanlectionary.org/bigideaapril09.asp> accessed 3 January 2010
4. Watts, Isaac. “Amazing Grace.” The New National Baptist Hymnal. Nashville, TN: National Baptist, Publishing Board, 1977. p. 135.
5. Hawkins, Alice Tina. “A Hand.” Graduate of Gallaudet College. 2006. Gallaudet College is a nationally recognized college for persons who are deaf and hard of hearing.