

Clear as Mud
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Presbyterian Church in Leonia
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John 9:1-41

“I once was blind, but now I see.” This line spoke especially to John Newton, who composed the lyrics to “Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound ” after a powerful experience of conversion. He had participated in the transatlantic slave trade, and was a sailer for that purpose. On one particularly stormy trip at sea, he nearly lost his life to wind and flood battering the ship. He called out to God, and was rescued. He became religious, studying Greek and Hebrew and then was ordained as a minister. But his eyes were still not opened. Grace for him was a gradual process, but he did come to see the inhumanity of the slave trade in which he had been complicit. His real conversion came when he renounced that life, and became an abolitionist.

The story of Jesus’ healing of the blind man speaks of a powerful transformation, an opening of eyes. But it was not just the blind man’s eyes that needed opening. Those whose concern for naming sinners and preserving traditions could see with their eyes, but were blind with their hearts to what God was doing in their midst through Jesus.

John’s gospel calls out the faulty thinking that if we have our health, if we do not need to beg in the streets, if we can provide for our families, then it is because God is pleased with us, and has rewarded us with blessing. The flip side to that thinking is that we think that people who are homeless and begging, or people who struggle with a mental or physical illness have these problems because they somehow deserve it; God is punishing them for their sins.

Let me be clear: I do not agree with this way of thinking, and apparently, neither does Jesus. When the disciples asked Jesus, “Who sinned: this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus says, neither the man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works may be revealed in him.”

Now I used to believe that Jesus was saying that the man was made blind by God so that he could be a tool, to show the wonder and power of Jesus who would one day heal him.

I have rethought this belief, because I have witnessed God’s works revealed in people who live with disabilities– not because they are healed, but because, just as they are, they teach me something about who God is: God’s creativity, God’s vulnerability; God’s resilience; God’s beauty, God’s humanity. Jesus looked at the blind man, and before the man could look back at Jesus and see, Jesus saw all these things in the man.

Still, first century Palestine wasn’t really set up for the visually impaired– so in addition to seeing the man as a reflection of God, Jesus helped the man to *literally* see.

Jesus spit into the ground, and made a muddy paste with the dirt, then smeared the mud across the man's eyes. He told the man to go to the pool called "Siloam"-- that is, "*Sent*," and wash. The man came back, and he was able to see-- and then acted as one who had been commissioned, in water, and *sent* by Jesus to be part of his ministry. He becomes much more multidimensional than the nameless, blind beggar people had once disregarded.

Jesus had a way of looking at someone and seeing them in multiple dimensions. Perhaps that is how he could coax transformation out of them-- because he always had the capacity to see them for more than what was at face value.

Last Sunday night, it was a joy to see the movie *Everywhere, Everything, All at Once* sweep the top awards in the Oscars. It's a really weird movie; I highly recommend it! And it speaks to the multiple dimensions each person holds within them.

One thing that makes the movie truly bizarre is that the characters get the power to jump across the multiverse each time they do the most random and unexpected things-- the more bizarre, the better. For example, eating a tube of chapstick could give kung fu powers; snorting a housefly up the nose can enable another one to jump through the multiverse.

Jesus did a most unexpected thing when he spit into dirt and then wiped the mud he had made onto a stranger's face. I was reminded of the writers' conference I went to a couple weeks ago. Our keynote speaker, Barbara Brown Taylor, was speaking about the power of using the senses when we write. She talked about how many writers are good at describing what they see or what they hear. But, she said, "it's the senses that we are least comfortable writing about-- maybe touch, maybe taste, maybe smell-- that can surprise us and our readers by holding the most power. They can often be a back door to meaning."

Jesus spitting and making mud that he uses to heal is a strange and unexpected thing, and it connected him to another time and place-- at the beginning of creation, as Genesis tells it, God dug into the mud, and with God's hands fashioned the body of a human, and then breathed into the nostrils of that body, and it became a living being. In other words, Jesus does a weird thing, and it gets him in touch with the creative power of God.

We could get bogged down in the details of whether or not the miracle actually happened. How it happened is about as clear as mud. On a surface level, it is both absurd and unbelievable. As your pastor, I cannot say with certainty that it really happened. But I still love and need this story. I need to think that Jesus would get his hands dirty for me.

When I was in college and seminary, I did some work with the Open Door Community, which was an intentional community-- or commune-- of Christians in Atlanta working in solidarity with the poor and oppressed. The old, converted boarding house in midtown occupied by the community had people with PhD's living side by side with people who had been homeless their whole lives. I didn't live there but I sometimes joined them for worship,

advocacy, and meals— serving them to hundreds of people and eating with the smaller community that lived there.

The first time I worshiped with them, a shocking thing happened: when the time for communion came, they passed around a chalice, and people drank from the *shared* cup. It triggered every taboo about dirt and germs I had grown up with: seeing people living on the street drink from this shared cup. I didn't know that I could do it. And, as it turned out, I noticed with relief that some people just dipped their bread into the chalice, by intinction, as we will be doing here soon. But the more I worshiped and dined with this community, I heard the stories of the lives of homeless people in ways that made me see them not as beggars, but as poets, artists, storytellers, and survival experts. I learned they were mothers, and brothers, sons, spouses— each with relationships that made them and relationships that had broken them. In this community, they formed new relationships that brought them life— you could hear it not only in their generosity of care for one another, but also in their banter as they made fun of each other and sometimes of me too. We participated together in serving the poor and doing actions in the city, such as protesting when the City of Atlanta razed thousands of units of public housing and built in its same place a towering new prison. I saw through them that the real *dirt* to be concerned about is not the sharing of a common cup in remembrance of Christ with homeless people; the real **dirt** was the unbridled greed that took the homes of the poor and then made their poverty a crime.

Jesus spit into the dirt and called into question who is really clean. Who is a sinner, and who is pure. Whose bodies bear God's blessing, and who would God really curse. In Greek, Jesus used the word *blepó*, which means to see, perceive, or discern. It is a way of seeing, but with spiritual results. As for the crowd, however, which had already from their own perceptions had named the man as a sinner, the scripture in Greek uses the word *theóreo*, which is to look or gaze upon as a spectator.

In the movie *Everything, Everywhere, All at Once* there comes a shift, for Evelyn, the main character, who had been feeling disdain for her husband— someone who had been nothing but kind— and judgment of her daughter, who has brought a *girlfriend* she's dating home to her family's Lunar New Year celebration. But we can notice a shift in Evelyn when she starts wearing this strange, googly eye on her forehead. It's a symbol— like in several Eastern religions, of the third eye, of a new kind of consciousness, where she shifts from seeing people as a spectator does, to perceiving them, with deep love and compassion.

So how is your vision? I'm not asking if you need reading glasses or other physical fine-tuning of your eyes. I'm asking if you are looking with the spiritual eyes that *God* gave you, to view the world with love and compassion. If this is hard for you, maybe you can try working with another, unexpected sense. For Jesus, he used spit and dirt— can you feel the sticky, scratchy mud across your face as you imagine him pasting it on? Imagine that— mud to make you see better!

If mud can help vision, I wonder what the taste of blessed bread and the tangy sweetness of the fruit of the vine can do for our lives and our world– what holy senses they can open up for us. Taste, and see. Amen.