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"Our Given Identity"

John 9:1-11, 24-38

Hear now the Word of the Lord...

As Jesus went along, he saw a man blind from birth. ² His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?"
³ "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him. ⁴ As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. ⁵ While I am in the world, I am the light of the world."

⁶ After saying this, he spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man's eyes. ⁷ "Go," he told him, "wash in the Pool of Siloam" (a word means "Sent"). So the man went and washed, and came home seeing.

⁸ His neighbors and those who had formerly seen him begging asked, "Isn't this the same man who used to sit and beg?" ⁹ Some claimed that he was.

Others said, "No, he only looks like him."

But he himself insisted, "I am the man."

¹⁰ "How then were your eyes opened?" they asked.

¹¹ He replied, "The man they call Jesus made some mud and put it on my eyes. He told me to go to Siloam and wash. So I went and washed, and then I could see."

²⁴ A second time they summoned the man who had been blind. "Give glory to God by telling the truth," they said. "We know this man is a sinner."

²⁵ He replied, "Whether he is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!"

²⁶ Then they asked him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?"

²⁷ He answered, "I have told you already and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples too?"

²⁸ Then they hurled insults at him and said, "You are this fellow's disciple! We are disciples of Moses! ²⁹ We know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this fellow, we don't even know where he comes from."

³⁰ The man answered, "Now that is remarkable! You don't know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. ³¹ We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the

godly person who does his will.³² Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. ³³ If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.” ³⁴ To this they replied, “You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!” And they threw him out.

³⁵ Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, and when he found him, he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?”

³⁶ “Who is he, sir?” the man asked. “Tell me so that I may believe in him.”

³⁷ Jesus said, “You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you.”

³⁸ Then the man said, “Lord, I believe,” and he worshiped him.

The Word of the Lord...

Let us pray,

Gracious God, in you all things take their being. And through you comes healing for all things. We thank you for your Son who sees us for who we really are, your beloved creation. Amen.

There are some biblical passages that we have heard so many times throughout our lives that our minds go on autopilot when we hear them. Stories that we knew so well in our childhood that we often do not think to return to them; however, you might be greatly surprised how much a simple change in perspective gives new life to an old story. Hear now, again, the story of Jesus healing the blind man but in a different way.

There once was a man that was blind from birth, born into a world of darkness. Left contemplating the impact that sin has left on his life. Day in and day out he is forced to be the public face of the consequence of sin. He sits long hours by the side of the road with an outstretched hand. Reaching out for help, reaching out for hope, reaching out for light. He is well known throughout the town for the same reason that gossip is wide spread. The unapologetic murmurings of the offenses against God are a constant back drop to this man's day, interrupted only by an intermittent sorrowful plea for help.

One day the man hears an unfamiliar voice speak the same familiar phrase, "who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind". To the man's surprise he heard a

refreshingly new retort, "neither this man nor his parents sinned. This happened so that the works of God may be displayed in him". A fantastic thought raced through the man's mind, "I am a work of God, not a work of Sin". Enthralled with this idea the man leaned forward, ear trained to hear the next words of the stranger that spoke more truth than he had ever heard. The man sat there postured as if he could see through the darkness to some distant light. Just then he felt the shock of cold wet mud being placed upon his eyes and hears only the words "go wash in Siloam". The man hurried to his feet and notices his feet carrying him away. His mind tells him that the way is unknown and that a journey in the dark is perilous, yet his feet continue to move as he traverses the walk ways. Realizing that he has finally reached his destination by the feeling of the water around his ankles, the man surrenders his body to the water. He scratches at the mud on his eyes as a man digging his way out of a dark cave and into the glorious light of day. Each pass of his fingers reveals a glimpse of the bright blue sky until all darkness had been washed away and only light remains.

The trip back into town was a surreal one as the man took in the new sights of the same old town he had lived in all his life. His neighbors could not believe that he was the same man, but with a new gleam in his eyes he answered "I am him". Quickly he was rushed off to meet the same religious leaders whose synagogue he had just hours earlier been begging outside of. Much to his surprise he was not met with a joyful celebration but rather by a tense cross examination. He pleaded his case but it seemed as if when the man had gained his sight he had lost his voice in the process. The man was repeating himself over and over again to the same line of questioning, but his words landed of deaf ears. "I was blind, but now I see", the man answered yet again as he was being forced out of the Temple doors. In a cruel turn of fate, it was as if God had given him his sight just so that he could see himself thrown out of the synagogue.

Outcast and dejected, sitting in the same place he had been a blind man begging only hours earlier, he hears a familiar voice say "do you believe in the Son of Man?" He

knew this Son of Man must have been the one that opened his eyes. His heart raced just as it did when he caught the first glimpse of the blue sky. "Who is he sir? Tell me that I might believe in him" the man answered. As Jesus spoke the man's eyes could see more clearly than he had ever dreamt possible and he fell at the beautiful radiant feet of Jesus and worshiped him.

What we are presented with in this story is a step by step journey of finding an identity in God. First we are introduced to a man whose very being cannot be separated from sin. Then we see Christ literally and intentionally giving part of himself to the man by making mud with his saliva and covering the man's eyes, the very mark of sin in his life. The man is then sent to the Pool of Siloam and a wonderful transformation takes place, the man is separated from the identity of sin and he does from blind begger to follower of Jesus.

This passage has an interesting literary device that many people overlook and what it does is allow us to read ourselves into the life and breath of the text. Notice that the man in this story, the one whom we get such a powerful look into his life, is nameless. We are presented with a good deal of his back story; he is a beggar that has been blind from birth, he is publicly viewed as a sinner or the son of sinners (which seems to be just as bad), and if you read this story in its entirety we are also introduced to the not so loving dynamic that exists between his parents and him. We even know the name of the body of water that he bathed in, but as for the man himself no name is given.

Now, that is a bit curious don't you think? We know from many other scriptural passages and countless hymns that this healing of the blind man was a momentous event in Christ's ministry, yet this one important detail is left out. When we encounter an oddity such as this in scripture it is a sign that we need to read a bit closer. Think of it as a literary speed bump that is there to ensure that you are going speeding through God's Word so fast that you miss the informative elements. In this particular case many scholars

believe that not naming this man is deliberately done for the sole purpose of creating an empty space in which we can substitute this man's identity for our own identity.

It is very easy to be dismissive about passages such as this one, thinking that this was a special case in which Jesus provided healing for a person that doesn't resemble us today in our lives. However, the truth is that every one of us is reflected in this story in some way. You might be like that man as he was desperately searching for the pool so that he could finally wash away the mud and cleans himself of his old life. Maybe you are sharing in the pain and loneliness that comes from living in a world that labels people according to their sins and shortcomings. Or maybe you are just simply trying to figure out who you are in relation to be people around you. The real crux of this story, the true turning point, was the man's realization of where he found his identity. Was he a product of sin or was he a product of God's grace? We see that the disciples were struggling with this very issue in the beginning of the story. When they looked at the man all they saw was sin which is why the first words out of their mouths was "who sinned"? However, when Christ looked at the man he didn't see sin instead he saw a work of God. Mind you this was before Christ had even begun to heal the man.

Much like the man in this story we all too often we accept our sins and shortcomings as our identities just as this man did for so long as he sat begging by the side of the road. However, as Christ reminds us in this text, that our sins do not comprise who we are. When asked about the correlation between who the man was and sin, Christ's response was perfect and profound as it always is when he said, "this happened so that the works of God may be displayed in him". Christ knows that our identity, who we really are, ultimately comes from the one that created us in His own image. Our real identity was given to us by our creator and it is further informed by our relationship with the Triune God as the creator, sustainer, and redeemer.

There is a sermon that Dr. Barnes gave at the end of every academic year while I was in seminary. Referring to the numerous commencement speeches that we have all heard over the years, he would say that graduates are always told that if they dream their own dreams, do their own thing and work hard, they can be whatever they want to be. However, Dr. Barnes goes on to say that what the graduates are not told is how to know who it is that they want to be. It used to be that you inherited your identity from your family, if your father was a farmer, you were a farmer. If your mother was a baker, you were a baker. That's also why many people's last names are derived from the work that their family traditionally did. But in modern times we have opted for greater independence. Now if you want to change who you are you go to school and get a degree in something else, or you just simply change professions, or move to a different state and maybe change your name. Get a haircut and maybe grow a mustache that curls up at the ends... We assume that individuals just inherently and independently know how to put life together for themselves, and when we fail to put our lives together just so, we run into a bit of an identity crisis. That's because your identity, your life, is not dependant on who you choose to be, rather it is dependent God who created you.

The biblical depiction of life begins with the words "in the beginning God..." and it ends the promises of a future that is also created by God. And all the words in between testify to the truth that all life is made, redeemed, and sustained by God. The biblical narrative for our lives can be seen as the unfolding drama of what happens when we lose focus of our given identities of being made in God's image, and choose instead to focus on how lousy we are at cultivating our own identities.

As the theologians remind us, creation occurred out of nothingness. This means that all things, even the very elements from which human beings were created, have their existence in God. So when we assume an identity that is derived from anything other than God, we are not assuming an identity that has any substance. This is the very lie the serpent told Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden when he told them that their identity

could be changed by reaching for something other than what they were given by the creator. Our accidentals in life, our superfluities, our sins, they do not change the identities that we been given by the creator. And all our self defining does not fill our lives with meaning; instead it has left our souls filled with the primordial nothingness that exists apart from God.

The Christian hope, the hope that we have for our lives, is that in Jesus Christ, God became flesh to restore meaning into our lives by reconciling us to the one in whom we live, and breathe, and have our being. When the Word what was with God, the Word that was God, became flesh and dwelt among us, our true identity was restored into the nothingness that we made of ourselves and the world. As the Holy Spirit binds us to the Word, allowing us to take our identity in Christ, we recover who we were created to be. So to be clear, we are not defined by our sins and shortcomings. We receive our identities through our participation in Christ who calls us into communion with the creator.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen