

## **HEALING THE BLIND AND THE SIGHTED: BIBLICAL IMAGES PARTICULARLY JOHN 9 AND 21<sup>ST</sup>**

### **CENTURY IMPLICATIONS**

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The images of the blind in the Old and New Testaments have stigmatized and made ill the very people the stories discussed curing. After locating myself so readers know my vantage point and prejudices, I will discuss Old and New Testament views of blindness and the results these views have had within the faith community and society in general. Implications for a liberation theology of blindness will then be sketched with particular reference to reading John Chapter 9 in a new way. Practical implications for faith communities (of both blind and sighted members) will be delineated.

I was born prematurely fifty years ago and given too much oxygen at birth. This left me almost completely blind but alive. My parents took me to numerous eye doctors seeking restoration of sight, but when this was deemed impossible, they set about educating me. This meant advocating for my inclusion in the local public schools with pull-out classes in Braille, typing and using a long cane to get around. I grew up wishing I could see and not wanting to "act blind" like by carrying a cane. At college I met and became friendly with other blind students for the first time. My first major experience of close community with other blind people was the month I spent at the Seeing Eye while getting my first Seeing Eye dog near the end of my graduate training. My experiences of outright discrimination because of my blindness were sporadic until I applied for jobs with my doctorate in clinical psychology in hand. In my letter of application, I mentioned that I was blind. The major way this limited me, I said, was that I could not drive a car between campuses. I applied to almost 150 universities and community mental health centers and garnered three interviews. The university that hired me asked me in their interview what would I do if a student shot up heroin in class. Being part of a blind and

sighted bowling league and being a bar tender at a state convention of a blind organization are some of my fond memories of the blindness community. Now I belong to several listserves of blind people concerned about technology access issues, employment as a blind person, and guide dogs.

In my work as a psychologist, I teach, counsel, supervise and do frequent outreach presentations to children and adults about disability awareness. I especially enjoy teaching Psychology of the Exceptional Child because I can help form the attitudes and knowledge base of future service providers. Ten years ago, I developed fibromyalgia (similar to chronic fatigue syndrome). This has allowed me personal insights about the contrasts in the ways people react to visible and invisible disabilities. Religiously, I grew up in a liberal Protestant church, which I left as a teenager. The contrast between the Sunday school stories about being nice to everybody (not provided in Braille or on tape) and my classmates lack of inclusion of me was too much. About ten years later when my "god" of psychology was not able to save me from divorce, I checked back in to a religious quest. I have been a Catholic for about fifteen years and proudly locate myself as a "back row Catholic Christian." Back row status allows me to hear both literally and figuratively what's going on in the world and to make my own theological and ethical decisions as I must. The back row is also populated by parents with toddlers, who are the best people in the world to know according to my Seeing Eye dog, especially if they have Cheerios.

This middle-class, white, middle-aged, Midwestern female psychologist who has engaged God from a Christian perspective about the meaning of life throughout adulthood will now attempt to guide you on a quick tour of Old and New Testament views of blindness. The Hebrew Bible shows five views of blindness worth noting. One image is that of blindness as a blemish, which disqualifies one from temple service (Leviticus 21:18-21; 2Samuel 5:9). Blind people are also portrayed as groping and

incompetent (Isaiah 59:10; Deuteronomy 28:29). Other Hebrew Bible references suggest that God punishes sinners by blinding them or their animals (Zephaniah 1:17; Zachariah 12:4). But compassion toward the blind is a duty for good believers (Leviticus 19:14; Deuteronomy 27:18). Isaiah also contains multiple references to a God of compassion who opens the eyes of the blind (35:5; 42:7; 42:16; 42:18-9). These disparate images could be combined as: blindness is a blemish that limits a person, sometimes caused by God and that blind people are to be taken care of by the sighted (Ruconich and Schneider 2001).

The New Testament introduces two new views of blindness. Jesus heals the blind (Matthew 9:27-8; 12:22, 15:30-1; 20:30 and 21:14) just to name the Matthean versions. Also Jesus disputes the Hebrew Bible connection between blindness and sin (John 9:3). Blind people are still viewed as objects of charity (Luke 14:14).

As early as the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD, hospices and cloisters for the blind were established to carry out this charitable mission (Monbeck 1973 p.26). Fast forward to 1824 when Louis Braille, first taught by a local priest (even though he was blind and poor), invented a raised code for letters which will enable the blind to be literate. Braille codes for most of the world's languages exist, as well as for music, math, scientific and computer notations. Christian philanthropy for the blind established early schools for the blind in the U.S. in the 1800's and church-related Publishing efforts in Braille like the Xavier Society founded in 1900.

A review of some of the daily realities of blind people in the U.S. today will be used to illustrate how far we have and have not come from the attitudes of the Old and New Testaments. 58% of working-age legally blind people are unemployed and most would like to be working (Tannenbaum 2000). An extra tax credit is given to blind people, but not to any other people with disabilities. The U.S. Mint has declared it can't make different sized paper money denominations as some Third World countries have

done. So U.S. blind people do not know what denomination a bill is without asking a sighted person. Secret ballots, talking ATMs, described television shows and videos have been invented but are available less than 1% of the time. Doing research for a paper such as this involves using the services of a human being to locate relevant passages in books, a scanner attached to a talking computer to read articles, a tape recorder to read books on tape from Recordings for the Blind and Dyslexic a Braille writer to write the first draft of the article, a talking computer, which I type the paper so it can be read by others, and again the services of a sighted person to proofread and finish formatting the paper so it looks right. It is commonly estimated that it takes two or three times as long for a blind person to read as for a sighted person. Only about twenty percent of blind people in the U.S. have access to a talking or Braille display computer and many sites on the Internet are read with difficulty because of their extensive use of graphics.

Government websites were mandated to have new pages be accessible starting in June 2001, but no similar law exists for privately owned webpages. Information access, (from knowing how to make Hamburger Helper to reading package inserts on medicine, to filling out the water meter card) is one of the continuing challenges for people who are blind.

Three paradigms for considering any disability, including blindness, have been used. The moral model (tracing back to the views shown in the Old and New Testaments) views blindness as something to be ashamed of and blind people as inferior. Some of the common stereotypes of blind people that fit with this paradigm are that blind people have many disabilities (as when someone shouts at me or asks the sighted person next to me what I want). Another version of this stereotype is when people pay a blind person what to them is a high compliment by saying "I don't think of you as blind." This stereotype is also seen when people assume that blind people are "superior" in some way, such as being above being interested in sex or being "so brave." About fifteen

years ago there was a giant flap about providing Playboy in Braille (no pictures) as part of the National Library Service magazine collection. Interestingly, no magazine racier than Ladies Home Journal is provided in Braille for women. In the moral view of blindness, a good blind person would be passive and grateful for charity shown. John Milton's Sonnet on his Blindness written over 300 years ago fits well within this paradigm: "They also serve who only stand and wait."

The second paradigm for considering blindness is that of the medical model. What cannot be fixed by modern medicine can be ameliorated by rehabilitation and education. Blind people can learn to read Braille, travel independently with white canes or guide dogs, and use talking computers. "Good" blind people in this paradigm seek to be cured of their blindness and if this is not possible to learn to exist as effectively as possible in a sighted world.

The third model of blindness is that of a minority group. The last 25 years have seen "the last civil rights movement" happen when people with disabilities have banded together. This view sees a disability as the social, political, cultural phenomenon that happens when a person has an impairment. Eiesland (1994) points out that to be considered a minority group, a group must be identifiable, suffer prejudice and discrimination, be a group that is not joined by choice, identify as such, and usually intermarry. People who are blind are often identifiable by their use of adaptive equipment. The high unemployment rate cited earlier is but one example of the prejudice faced by people who are blind. There are very few individuals who would choose to be blind. For example, many elderly individuals who are losing their sight will not use books on tape because they are for "blind people." Two large (and sometimes warring) organizations of the blind exist. Often blind people marry other blind people. When I was married, the most common question was "is your husband blind?" and when I said he wasn't, he was often pronounced to be a saint for

marrying me.

No single paradigm captures the total experience of any person who is blind. They will serve as useful viewpoints from which to consider theological implications of blindness in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Blind people are present in our faith communities and are served by them. John Milton Society and the reference circular from the Library of Congress shown in the references section delineate the offerings of particular denominations. The difficulty seems to occur when the blind individual wants to be more than a passive churchgoer (Ruconich and Schneider 2001). Issues faced by congregants range from getting to church (often public transportation is not available on Sunday) and not being asked to take leadership roles. Those called to ministry have had to fight to overcome attitudes dating back to the Leviticus prohibition on service cited earlier. Old theology and old attitudes are not checked at the church doors. A disability studies in religion consultation was started in the AAR in 1991 and has discussed some of these attitudinal and architectural barriers in religion.

Liberation, feminist and body theologies have introduced ways of theologizing and concepts that will be useful in theologizing about blindness. The starting point of liberation and feminist theologies is the poor, the marginalized, the nonperson. The hermeneutical circle of experience-text-experience lets the marginalized participate in theologizing at the popular level. Body theologies take this one step further by doing critical reflection on bodily experience. Although many body theology authors rail against the idolatry of the "perfect body" some have been amazingly silent about impaired bodies. For example, Ashley's *Theologies of the Body* does not mention disability or handicap once in its 770 pages. Creation spirituality clearly acknowledges the body as good no matter what its impairments. Liberation and feminist theologies have bridged the gap between the personal and the political and have used the tools

of social science to analyze particular marginalizing situations. The images of Jesus as boundary crosser and liberator, in solidarity with the marginalized give a new hope of liberation from suffering in this world. The call for the people of God to struggle for liberation together be they majority or minority group members is clear.

Theodicy has long tried to answer the question of why there is suffering and by extension disability. The fact that a book like *Tuesdays with Morrie* has been on best-seller lists for over 100 weeks shows that this is a concern of many people (Albom 1997). Kutz-Mellem (1999) has summarized theodicy views of disability as follows: God's will, punishment, test of faith, opportunity for character development, manifestation of the power of God, redemptive suffering and God's mysterious omnipotence (55). A given individual may express several of these perspectives on his/her blindness.

Theologizing about one's blindness may also be influenced by his/her stage of acceptance of the condition. Initially, this was conceptualized as being similar to the stages of acceptance of dying posited by Kubler-Ross (Carroll 1962). Later authors pointed out that disability is an experience rather than a loss (Hahn 1997). Possibilities for going beyond acceptance to disability pride, disability positive and disability culture and connections have also been noted (Gilson 1997). Corker (personal communication, 2001) has pointed out however that "the pride model, however desirable, can on occasions become narcissistic and exclusivistic."

Theologizing about theodicy in general and one's own circumstances in particular, can either help or hinder a positive identity formation. For example, Erin (1991) found that immediately after the birth of a child who was blind twenty percent of the parents surveyed viewed visual impairment as a punishment for sin, but that percentage dropped to four percent as time passed. Initially 32 percent of the parents thought they had been especially chosen by God to raise their special child and this rose to 45 percent over time.

In the last 25 years various theologies of disability have been put forth. Most start from the position that we are all “fearfully and wonderfully made,” as the psalmist said. A disability is but one part of who a person is, and we all have different gifts. Disabled people are called to use their gifts for the service of God. After all, Moses was called to lead the people of Israel and he stuttered. The resurrected Jesus still had wounds. Jesus cured some people with disabilities, but more importantly he talked to and associated with them. The Jesus who suffered on the cross and lamented “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” also was resurrected. People with disabilities can take hope and comfort from a God who suffers with but for whom suffering is not the last word. God empowers the daily struggles of people with disabilities both with the concrete limitations which are part of their disabilities but also with the societal attitudes that limit their participation in this world. But people with disabilities are not only “suffering servants” they are also leaders. For example, St. Paul’s thorn in the flesh may have been a seizure disorder. Temporarily able-bodied people should be struggling beside people with disabilities, not pitying or stereotyping them. People without disabilities should also be seeking healing from their ableism.

Most blind characters in the Old and New Testaments, with the exceptions of blind Bartimaeus and the man born blind are not central actors in the stories in which they appear. They tend to be unidimensional objects of pity or healing. Jesus’s bringing sight to the blind is a fulfillment of the eschatological deliverance motif first sounded in Isaiah. Images of darkness equals sin equals blindness and sight equaling light equaling insight were widespread in Old and New Testament times (Moore 2000, Kleege 1999, Barasch, 2001). They still are. Consider two titles found in an Amazon.com book search when the word “blind” was used: *Blindness and Insight* (1983) and *A Psychoanalysis for Our Time; Exploring the Blindness of the Seeing* (1998). The line in the hymn “Amazing Grace,”

penned over 150 years ago, "was blind but now I see" is still used for a shorthand way to say, "now I understand."

Having had the opportunity to hear many sermons on John chapter 9, the story of the man born blind, that fell short in my opinion of preaching the Gospel to me, I decided to focus this paper on that text. John 9 is a story of a nameless man, healed by Jesus, who grows in his understanding of who Jesus is. It's also the story of the Pharisees, who are not visually impaired, but do not change their views of Jesus in spite of his healing of the man. When I consulted Barclay's commentary and an Internet source of sermons, [www.sermoncentral.com](http://www.sermoncentral.com), to find common interpretations of John chapter 9, I found very little focus on the blind man himself (Barclay's and Brown's Commentaries). He was noted to be irritated by the Pharisees questioning and he trusted God or would not have gone to the pool to complete the healing. Unfortunately in the over 20 sermons posted on the Internet site cited there was quite a bit about how horrible blindness is (apparently all the clergy commenting were sighted) and several indicated that blindness was the result of sin, even if not this particular blind man's sin.

Most of the sermons I have heard about this chapter contain the following elements: the author's knowledge of amazing blind people who climbed Mount Everest or were cheerful all the time; a comment on how awful it would be to be blind; noting that Jesus's healing of the blind man was miraculous, pointing out that the Pharisees were blind to not recognize Jesus for who he was and a prayer that we never act blind (insensitive) to the world around us.

Focusing on the blind man in a process similar to that suggested by Gonzalez (1980), I'd like to suggest considering some of the following exegetical points:

9:3 What other works in addition to God's power in curing him might this verse refer to?

What strengths to cope does a disability develop in people?

9:7: How did the blind man get to the pool to wash? By asking for assistance? Why did he go? What was he thinking as he found his way there?

9:9: When the blind man said, "I am the man," he was saying he still was the same man even after his cure; that not much had changed. Was he also saying that he was not ashamed of having been blind, and earning his living the best he could by begging?

9:9-17: As the blind man answered the questions of bystanders and the Pharisees, was he remembering other times when other people thought they knew his case better than he did?

9:18-23: As the parents are questioned, how many parents of disabled/blind kids can identify with this questioning from others about what they are doing and why?

9:24-34: In this second questioning by the Pharisees, the blind man escalates his assertive answering. He is clearly tired of defending himself. Even though he has been cured of his blindness, he was not healed by being accepted by his community. Now he was cast out for his beliefs.

9:38: In saying "Lord I believe" he was taking a strong stand. Had living his life as a blind person given him the strength to do this?

9:41: People with disabilities do not have to be ashamed of their disabilities, and that's the last word in this healing narrative. In the end, the blind man is the one shown to be open to revelation.

In this passage, the blind man's recognition for Jesus, for who he is, shows the importance of a relationship with Jesus for the blind man. Jesus, the boundary-crosser, entered his world, and that may be more important good news than his physical healing. The man was liberated from blindness and the status of blind beggar, but more than that he was liberated to know Jesus. This liberation was not accepted by the Pharisees.

In addition to Jesus's curing of the blind man, did he also want to heal the temporarily able-bodied to walk beside the blind man in a journey of faith? How can

people who see in the 21<sup>st</sup> century avoid treating people who are blind the way the Pharisees treated the man born blind? Carr-Ruffino (1999) suggests the following seven action strategies: get in touch with stereotypes and prejudices, open your mind to other viewpoints and listen, learn about other groups, express respect and appreciation, open yourself to empathy and intuition, build trust and work with diverse people for common goals. To make these more specific to disabilities/blindness and to faith communities I would add the following:

1. Look around your places of work and worship, your circle of friends and your favorite places to play. If you do not see one out of seven people with disabilities, ask yourself why. After you've acknowledged that maybe you don't know the disability status of all the people you see and that maybe people with disabilities "don't want to be there," hunt for other explanations. Are there physical and/or attitudinal barriers you can find?
2. Imagine yourself with a particular disability like blindness going through your typical day. What would you need to do differently? This will give you good ideas of what services you might need to join with people with disabilities to advocate for.
3. Watch your language. I'm not asking for politically correct circumlocutions like "visually challenged." There is nothing wrong with the word blind. Please do not use it to mean ignorant or out-of-control, as in "blind rage", however.
4. The biblical injunction still stands: "Invite the blind to your feasts." I would broaden this to joining organizations to work for civil rights for and with people with disabilities. Also make friends with people who happen to have disabilities. After the initial discomfort of working out the concrete details of the disability accommodation, you will be repaid for the extra effort by gaining a new perspective on the world.

Being a boundary crosser can help liberate and heal you as well as those you are crossing the boundary to walk with in solidarity. What would Jesus do?

For those of us born blind, or visually impaired at any time in life, John Chapter Nine also poses some challenges:

1. Where is God in your blindness?
2. How do you step out in faith?
3. How do you deal with discrimination because of your blindness? How do these incidents impact your faith?
4. Where are you on the dependence-independence-interdependence continuum?
5. Are there ways you wish your faith community treated you as a blind person differently? How are you attempting to achieve these?

## Disabled People and Religious Communities

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