

**“The blessings of an imperfect life”<sup>1</sup>**

John 9:1-41

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**As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life. As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world." Having said this, he spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man's eyes. "Go," he told him, "wash in the Pool of Siloam" (this word means Sent). So the man went and washed, and came home seeing. His neighbors and those who had formerly seen him begging asked, "Isn't this the same man who used to sit and beg?" Some claimed that he was. Others said, "No, he only looks like him." But he himself insisted, "I am the man." "How then were your eyes opened?" they demanded. 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." "Where is this man?" they asked him. "I don't know," he said.**

The first cataract surgery had gone so well and so easily, Harry went into the second surgery without any trepidation. He and his wife arrived the day after the surgery for the post-surgical checkup. His wife thought it would be so seamless she didn't even go inside with him. She told him she would run an errand nearby. She left him off at the hospital door without a second thought. She ran her errand and returned to the hospital, waiting at the curb. He wasn't down yet, and she thought it a bit strange.

Just as she began to worry, her cell phone rang. "Mrs. Jones, you need to come on up to Dr. Madison's office. There has been a complication." She threw her keys to the parking attendant and raced into the hospital.

"We aren't sure what has happened, but Harry has lost the sight in his left eye. We fear it is permanent, but we will need to do some tests."

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<sup>1</sup> Title borrowed from Philip Simmons, Learning to Fall: The Blessings of an Imperfect Life, 2002, Bantam Books.

I telephoned him two days after I had heard of the loss. “I ran into some bad luck,” he said. “All my life I have had a string of good luck, and this time, it wasn’t so good.” “I can hardly complain. There are so many times I dodged a bullet. A bullet that might have killed me on the inside. Or a bullet that might have killed me physically. But it didn’t happen. I am lucky. I am blessed. I can’t complain.”

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Writer and English professor Philip Simmons was diagnosed with ALS disease when he was only thirty five years old. An avid hiker and outdoorsman, and father of two small children, Simmons had to have been devastated by the death sentence. Under the shadow of ever-increasing physical disability, he was given only a few short years to live.

Shortly after Simmon’s muscles began to deteriorate, he started to write a series of essays which would take him two years to complete and publish. Simmons had the remarkable insight, the gift, to see beyond his death sentence. To look beyond the confines of his illness. His reflections are shared in his book, “Learning to Fall: The Blessings of an Imperfect Life” (from which my sermon title is drawn). Simmons was able to see God’s blessing even in his diagnosis, even in his loss of abilities, even in his impending death.

He says, “Those of us with terminal illnesses simply have been blessed---and I mean blessed—with having the facts of our own mortality *held constantly before us* (emphasis mine).”

“Not only must we accept our own deaths as a necessary part of that order but we must come to see that it is our very mortality that calls us to act according to our highest nature.”<sup>2</sup>

Just last night I finished re-reading a favorite novel by Wallace Stegner, Crossing to Safety. In it Stegner describes the lives of two couples over many decades. Good friends, one of the women was struck with polio shortly after her first child was born. Her husband reflects on their life together at the end of the book: “My chains are not chains. . . . Over the years Sally’s crippling has been a rueful blessing. It has made her more than she was; it has let her give me more than she would ever have been able to give me healthy; it has taught me at least the alphabet of gratitude.”<sup>3</sup> The alphabet of gratitude. Good theology in good fiction.

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<sup>2</sup> P. 14, Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Wallace Stegner, Crossing to Safety, p. 340.

Now, we must never diminish the pain of loss. Suffering, in and of itself, is not good. There are so many awful things that happen to so many people. There is so much suffering. It would be wrong to minimize it or to make light of it. It would be a distortion of the gospel to say that God wills terrible suffering.

The worst thing we can do is say to someone in pain, “Oh, it’s not that bad. Think of how many people are worse off than you.” God does not make light of pain and suffering, nor should we. When confronted with pain, what we can do is open our eyes and pay attention. Pay attention and look for the mystery of God’s presence. To begin to see God is there---even in illness, disability, suffering; and yes, even in death.

God is revealed and made known in suffering. In suffering, we may be cured of the blindness that so often accompanies us in our journey through life. Blind, to the mystery of life all around us. Blind, to the beauty of God’s work. Blind to our own need for grace. Blind, to our vulnerability, our sinfulness, our weakness. Blind, to our dependence on God and each other.

Sometimes things happen in order for God to be revealed, so we can know God, so we can notice God. Often it is only in our weakness we come to depend on him. In our time of pain we see, maybe for the first time, our frailty, our vulnerability, and our desperate need for God.

There are many stories of curing blindness in the gospels. The prophets foretold the Christ (the Messiah) would give sight to the blind (Is 29:18; 35:5, 42:7). In this way, the people would know the Messiah. “In that day the deaf will hear and the blind will see,” says the prophet Isaiah (Is 29:18)<sup>4</sup>.

There are many gospel stories of the blind being given sight, but only one such story in the gospel of John. And it is different from the other seven gospel stories of the blind being cured. It is different because it is a story of revelation and not simply a story of cure.

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<sup>4</sup> In Matthew, a demon-possessed man (who is blind and mute) is cured of his demons and given his sight and speech (Matthew 12). Later on in Matthew and in Luke, we come across two blind men on the side of the road, who call out to Jesus to be cured. Mark tells of the blind man who came to the pool of Bethsaida for a cure (Mark 8). All three of the synoptics, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, tell of blind Bartimaeus who called out from the road to Jesus.

In John, Jesus takes the initiative. The healing occurs on the Sabbath, and the healing happens *so that God will be revealed*. Not so that the man would see, though that is true, too, but so that God would be made manifest to the people. So that the people, who were blind to who Jesus was, could see. More than one person is cured of blindness in this gospel.

This scripture is set into the context of *revelation*. Of unveiling who Christ is. There is a lot of controversy swirling around Jesus. A lot of objection to the idea that he may be the Messiah. Many of the Jews, and the Pharisees, simply don't see it.

In the gospel of John, this revelatory miracle happens immediately after Jesus has talked with the Jews about Abraham. Christ says "I am. Before Abraham was born, I am." (John 8: 58) Can you just hear the echoes of God's mysterious answer to Moses in Exodus 3? You remember, when Moses asked God to tell him God's name during encounter with the burning bush. "I am who I am," God says. "I am," Jesus echoes.

This blind man being healed on the Sabbath happens just before Christ says, "I am the sheep gate. I am the good shepherd." "I am," JESUS is revealed as the one who can reverse the blindness of an entire lifetime with but one word, with one primitive action. "I am," JESUS, GOD, is revealed as the one who can reverse spiritual blindness in but a blink of an eye.

The one whose spit can cure blindness is the one who comes from God, the one who is God. The one who is, and was, and ever will be.

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This past week I read your stories of faith, published as a part of the *Appreciative Inquiry* you did several years ago. Thirty-one single spaced pages. I read it all in one swoop. I couldn't put it down. I was mesmerized by your faith, by your sense of community, by your openness and vulnerability.

And there was at least one strong theme throughout this group of stories. How many of you came to greater faith and a deeper relationship with God through illness, loss, disability, and death. A painful divorce, the loss of a child, a terrible accident, deteriorating health. I felt like scales had fallen off my eyes. God was revealed to you in your suffering. God spoke to you in your blindness. God revealed himself to you in new and mysterious ways. And in the reading of your stories, God made himself known to me as well.

Might we see the mystery of God's presence even as we suffer and fall, even as we plunge into depths of despair. Might we experience the blessings of an imperfect life, accepting and even welcoming the sorrows alongside the joys. Because the One who is revealed to us in sorrow is the One who has known every aspect of human suffering. He is our gate and our shepherd, he is the One who descended into the very depths of hell, he is the One who came back from death, to triumph and to bless, imperfect though our lives may be.