

Surprise!

On Sunday we looked at another dramatic encounter between Jesus, the Pharisees, and a blind man, as recorded in John 9.

1. Warm-up Question: Jeff began the sermon by telling about a surprise birthday party for David. Have you ever had a surprise party? If so, tell us about it.
2. Life is full of surprises, some of them welcome and some not so welcome. This week's Gospel passage tells us about two surprising encounters. **Encounter No. 1 – The Blind Man.** Read John 9:1-11, as printed on p. 3.
 - a. In verse 2, the disciples ask Jesus, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind.” The blind man had probably heard comments like this his entire life. Back then, people believed that misfortune was almost always punishment from God. How do you think it might have affected the blind man to hear, over and over, that he was a sinner being punished? Have people ever told you that you're a sinner? How did that affect you?
 - b. It's likely the blind man internalized the belief that his blindness was punishment from God. How do you think that affected his spiritual life?
 - c. In verse 3, Jesus tells the disciples, that contrary to popular belief, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned.” How do you think that statement might have affected the blind man?
 - d. In your own life, when bad things happen, have you had a tendency to assume it's because God is punishing you? Where did you learn to think that way? Why do you think that way of thinking is so prevalent?
3. After rejecting the notion that the blind man was being punished for sins, Jesus went on to say that he “was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.” In other words, not only was this man's blindness not punishment, it was actually an opportunity for God's work to be manifest in and through him.
 - a. What do you think we're supposed to learn from this for our own lives?
 - b. Jeff said, “Your point of greatest hardship in life right now is not punishment, it's an opportunity for God's work to be manifest in and through you.” Have you ever seen that happen in somebody's life, *i.e.*, hardship turned into something beautiful for God? Tell us about it.
 - c. What is the greatest hardship in your life right now? How might that hardship become an opportunity for God's work to be manifest in and through you?
4. **Encounter No. 2 – The Pharisees.** The Pharisees believed that religious rule keeping was the essence of what it means to be faithful to God. Jesus, by contrast,

believed that giving and receiving grace was the essence of what it means to be faithful to God. Thus, whenever there was a tension between grace and rules, Jesus went with grace. In our Gospel story, Jesus violated the Sabbath rule in order to heal the blind man. For the Pharisees, this was a sin and meant Jesus was not from God. Read John 9:13-16, and 24-34, as printed on p. 3.

- a. The Pharisees were convinced Jesus was a rule breaker, and thus a sinner, and therefore God could not possibly be working through him. By empowering Jesus to open the blind man's eyes, God was offering the Pharisees compelling evidence that they needed to change their theological outlook. Yet they stubbornly resisted. In your own life, tell us about a time you stubbornly resisted God's efforts to update and refine some aspect of your theological perspective? What happened?
 - b. Why do you think we feel such strong internal resistance to updating our theological perspectives?
 - c. Would you say your own theological perspective is more weighted toward grace or rule keeping? Has your perspective evolved over time? Why or why not?
 - d. Why is it dangerous for rule keeping to be the essence of our faith?
5. When God does something surprising in our lives, we can either embrace the surprise or we can stubbornly resist. That's true about our theology, and it's also true about all those times God allows circumstances to interrupt where we thought we were going in life. It's true when major life changes disrupt our plans (as when Steve Jobs got fired from Apple), and it's true when there are simple interruptions in the course of an ordinary day (as when Jeff found a kitten in dire need in the bushes at the church this past week). These disruptions are not punishment from God; they are opportunities for God's work to be manifest in and through us.
- a. Tell us about a simple interruption of your plans that occurred over the past week or so. How did you respond? Did it become – or could it have become – an opportunity for God to work in and through you in some unexpected way?
 - b. Tell us about a huge interruption of your plans that occurred somewhere along your life's path. How did you respond? Did it become – or could it have become – an opportunity for God to work in and through you in some unexpected way?

***Remember, surprises in life are not interruptions, they're opportunity.
So keep your heart and mind open to the surprising ways God works in your life!***

John 9:1-11

As he walked along, Jesus saw a man blind from birth. ²His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" ³Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. ⁴We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. ⁵As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." ⁶When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, ⁷saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. ⁸The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?" ⁹Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him." He kept saying, "I am the man." ¹⁰But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" ¹¹He 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."

John 9:13-16, and 24-34

¹³ They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. ¹⁴Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. ¹⁵Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, "He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see." ¹⁶Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath." But others said, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" And they were divided.

²⁴ So for the second time the Pharisees called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, "Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner." ²⁵He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." ²⁶They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" ²⁷He answered them, "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?" ²⁸Then they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. ²⁹We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from." ³⁰The man answered, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. ³¹We know that God does not listen to sinners, but God does listen to one who worships God and obeys God's will. ³²Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. ³³If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." ³⁴They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" And they drove him out.