

The Anthrōpos Problem

John 9:1-7

Sermon by Dan Schrock

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As he [Jesus] walked along, he 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. (NRSV)

According to my optometrist, I am blind. The legal definition of blindness in the United States is 20/200, and my eyes are worse than that.

In their natural state, my eyes only allow me to see vague shapes. At this moment, without any glasses on my face, virtually everything in this room is so blurry that I can hardly distinguish one thing from another. I do see the windows, faintly; and I can see a blur of what must be people; but I cannot tell you who is sitting where because I can't see well enough to figure out if you are Ruth or Jared, Barb or Richard. I cannot even read the words printed here on my pulpit notes. If I didn't already know this was paper printed with words, I could not have told you what it was. All I could tell you is that it's something white and rectangular with horizontal streaks of gray. In their natural state, my eyes really don't work very well.

I need help. So that my sight can function in the way God wants it to function, I need some kind of change that will enable me to see more clearly. In order for me to become the kind of person God intends for me to be, I need salvation. In other words, I need glasses. And fortunately, I have a pair here in my pocket.

Ha! What a difference! Now with proper glasses I see that John is sitting in the back row, Lana is over here to my right, and Beth is here on the left. I can pick out individual letters here on this white rectangle on the pulpit. I see a whole new world that I couldn't see before. With these glasses, I am no longer blind.

In the gospel of John, baptism is like getting a pair of glasses. Consider the story of the man in chapter 9. There are two important facts about him. First, through no fault of his own or anyone else's, he has been blind from the day of his birth. Blindness is his natural state, his natural condition. The disciples, as soon as they notice this blind man, immediately jump to the

conclusion that sin must have made him blind. This was a common belief in those days: if you were sick or had problems, then people just assumed sin was at the bottom of it. The only question was whether you had sinned or someone else close to you had sinned, like your parents. Either way, people believed that sin was the root of illness.

You still run into this same belief today. When my mother was dying of cancer, the pastor of her church came to visit her. While standing beside her bed, he told her she must have some sort of sin lurking in her past, because after all, she had cancer. Her cancer, he insisted, proved her sin. Therefore if she wanted to be well, she needed to confess and repent of that sin. To her credit, my mother got livid at him and as soon as he left, burst into tears because she knew that theology was hogwash. My father got even angrier when he found out about it later that day.

It's a very old belief, and it's the first question that pops into the disciples' heads: who sinned, Jesus? This man or his parents? Blindness has to be somebody's fault, so whose is it? Is the man at fault for being blind, or are his parents at fault? Those are the wrong questions, replies Jesus. Sin has nothing to do with it. That way of thinking is bad theology, and those who believe that all illnesses and problems come from sin simply do not know what they're talking about.

The second important fact about this man born blind is that the story simply calls him *anthrōpos*. The gospel of John never gives him a proper name like Sam or George or Thaddeus—it just calls him *anthrōpos*. *Anthrōpos* is the Greek word for “person.” It has a generic meaning that includes all people, both women and men, children and adults. From this Greek word we get our English word “anthropology.” Theologians use this word to talk about the human problem, so that anthropology is the branch of theology that tries to understand why we humans need God. What is our common human problem? What is our deficiency, and how does God save us from that deficiency, that problem?

You already know how we Christians usually answer the question. We usually say the main human problem is sin. We have “all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God,” says Paul in Romans 3:23. We've all failed to live up to God's high moral standards. We cannot keep the law; and even if we do somehow manage to obey the law perfectly, that perfection will make us proud and self-sufficient, which all by itself is a sin. So no matter whether we keep the law or not, we humans are trapped in sin; and only God can save us from that sin. For Paul, God saves us through the sacrificial death of Jesus on the cross. Because Jesus died on Calvary, God

forgives us. This way of thinking about sin and salvation is very common among Christians. It's probably how many of you think about sin and salvation, right?

It's fine to think that way about sin and salvation because after all, it is in one part of the Bible. But it's not how the gospel of John talks about things. Here we come smack up against the reality that the Bible, even the New Testament, sometimes understands things in different ways and consequently offers us different perspectives. The gospel of John does speak of sin, yes; but in John sin is refusing to accept that Jesus comes from God. Sin is refusing to believe that Jesus is the Messiah.

For the gospel of John, the core human problem is blindness. Your problem, and my problem, is that we can't see. In our natural state, we are born blind—not legally blind, but spiritually blind. That's why the person in John 9 has no other name except *anthrōpos*. He's every person. He is us, and we are him. The gospel of John wants us to empathize with this guy, to see ourselves in him, to identify with him. His deficiency is our deficiency. His blindness is our blindness. He's a symbol for all of us, whether we are Kenyan or Russian, Laotian or American. Each of us is born unable to see God or the things of God. We live down here on earth, while God lives above, in heaven. Consequently, there's a huge distance between us and God. Since our natural eyes are unable to see that far away into heaven, we are spiritually blind to God.

Now you know why we need Jesus. In the gospel of John, Jesus is the man from heaven who comes to us from above (3:13, 31; 6:33, 38). He's the only one who can come down to bridge the gap between us and God. His incarnation—his coming to us here on earth—is itself the beginning of our salvation. But what really saves us is how Jesus comes from heaven to earth. In this gospel, far more than in Matthew, Mark, or Luke, Jesus comes to us as blazing light, a divine light so powerful and persistent that there's no way the darkness can overcome him (1:5, 9; 8:12; 9:5). Jesus is the only one who sees God as God really is. He's the only one who's up-close, personal, and intimate with God. He's the only one who reflects the light of God.

In chapter 9, the Light of the World encounters this *anthrōpos*, who is born blind but who is actually all of us. And what does Jesus do? He puckers up his lips, spits down into the dry Palestinian dust, mixes a little mud, and dabs it on our eyes. What other biblical story does this remind you of? It reminds me of the story of creation in Genesis, where God does something similar. In Genesis 2:4-7, God mixes dust of the earth with a little water, and uses this mud to form the first human being, in Hebrew called *adam*. In English we usually pronounce that word as “Adam” and think of this creation as the first man. But the Hebrew word *adam* is not quite so gender specific. It really means “human being,” like that Greek word *anthrōpos*. God mixed mud in Genesis to create the first human being; and now in John, Jesus mixes mud again, which means that this is an act of re-creation. Jesus uses the mud to symbolically make a new *adam*, a new *anthrōpos*, a new human being who is us.

Next Jesus tells this almost new *anthrōpos* to go wash in the pool of Siloam. Get into the water. Get immersed. Let the waters wash over you. Come back up again out of the water. Folks, this is a baptism! Jesus, the man sent from heaven, is sending this *anthrōpos* to baptism. And what happens when the *anthrōpos* rises up from those baptismal waters? He can see! His blindness is gone. A whole new world has unfolded before him. He can see trees and flowers, birds and beetles. But most of all, he now sees Jesus; and through Jesus, he sees God. In the language of John 3, he has been born again; he has been born from above. This *anthrōpos* is no longer merely a person of the earth; he is now in a marvelous way born from heaven—where God lives. Thanks to the gift of spiritual sight, he can now see God and the things of God. Putting it as simply as I can, this *anthrōpos* has just experienced salvation. He sees.

Many of you have poor eyesight and know how a good pair of glasses can help you see a whole new world. That’s what baptism does for us: we start to see God and God’s kingdom for the first time. If you’ve ever received your first pair of glasses, then you know it takes a while to adjust to them. Usually there’s an initial period where you have to get used to how they fit on your nose and around your ears. You have to pay a little more attention when you walk up and down stairs, so you don’t trip. You have to learn how to look through the lenses rather than out the sides where there is no lens. There’s a learning curve for reading books and bulletin boards, computer screens and highway signs.

Just so after our baptism. In baptism, the Light of the World gives us the gift of spiritual insight. But we have to figure out how to use it, how to develop it. And this takes time. God is a

wee bit like the city of Chicago: huge, vast complex, pulsing with life. You can spend your whole life getting to know Chicago, walking around in it, driving in it, studying it, living with it. And even at age 92, you'd still not know everything about Chicago. That's the way God is. Even though we have the tremendous gift of spiritual insight, we'll spend a lifetime using it and still not see all the divine wonders there are to see. Spiritual practices such as worship, Bible study, prayer, service, communal connections, Sabbath rest, silence, meditation, and contemplation—gradually teach us how to see. They are ways to develop the gift of sight.

Let us go forth to treasure and develop this gift—because as we see, the work of God is revealed.