

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Our sister, Deaconess Pat Nuffer, had a profound effect on me when it comes to what we often label as “the disabled.” We could be talking about “the blind,” or “the deaf,” or “the dumb” (meaning those who can’t talk), or “the lame,” or “the mentally retarded.” That last one was commonplace when I grew up, and it probably was meant disparagingly. Nevertheless, that’s the way one would talk about those who were slow of mind. That’s, after all, what the verb means: to slow down; “To cause to move or proceed slowly; delay or impede” (www.ahdictionary.com).

Pat was sensitive to such labels, understandably. Those of you who don’t know Rick and Pat Nuffer, they have a son Karl who has downs syndrome. He’s a fun-loving guy, playful, who loves the Lord, and who was always ready to serve here at Zion. I miss them; I miss Karl.

Anyway, Pat was the one who taught me the inappropriateness, maybe even the hurtfulness, of labeling someone in this manner. It’s not “the disabled,” but “persons with disabilities.” In our text today, it’s not “the blind man” (although our text does refer to this man in one verse as τὸ τυφλὸν, the blind one or the blind man) ... but, as Pat taught me, it’s rather the “*man blind from birth*,” or the man “*born blind*,” the emphasis on the person or on the man and not on the disability. In other words, the disability does not define who the person is.

Is it a big deal? It is for people with disabilities, who write about it. They write about their value as people, about the fact that their disability does not erase the image of God in which they were knit together in their mother’s wombs. They write that they themselves are gifts even though they have a disability.

Lutherans surely agree with that view; thus, our view on the sanctity of life from conception to natural death; thus, our teaching that the little child even in the womb is one of Jesus’ little lambs for whom the Good Shepherd laid down His life, one redeemed by His blood; thus, our encouragement for mothers to look at their child as God’s gift, even if they receive the heart-rending news that their child might be born with a disability.

And it is often heart-rending. For example, here are the words of a woman called Karen at the birth of her daughter with a disability: “When we had Danielle, the first thing I didn’t think was ‘blessing.’ And so I had guilt because of that, because I am religious and I was like, ‘Gosh, I should feel blessed. I’ve got this beautiful little baby.’ But I’m thinking, ‘Mine’s broken. This one’s broken.’” “Karen[’s] ... initial reactions were dominated by feelings of grief,” but she later came to realize that her daughter was a blessing.¹ Yes, the child herself was a

¹ Marsha Michie & Debra Skinner, “Narrating Disability, Narrating Religious Practice: Reconciliation and Fragile X Syndrome,” *Intellect Dev Disabil*, April 2010.

Jesus Heals Our Blindness, Physical and Spiritual — John 9:1–7, 13–17, 34–39
Page 2 Lent 4a Pastor Douglas Punke
blessing — a gift from God — even amidst the “challenges and disappointments.” She was a human being — to be sure, a sinner like the rest of us, “*by nature [a child] of wrath, like the rest of [us]*” (Eph. 2:3), but a human being with dignity and worth, the same as anyone else.

But Karen felt guilt, for whose fault was it that her child had this disability? Surely, it couldn't have been her daughter's fault, could it? Was it her own fault? What did she do wrong? Or her husband's fault?

That's the question set before us today in the Gospel as Jesus encounters a blind man. “*Rabbi,*” the disciples asked Jesus, “*who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?*” They rightly understood that sin was the root cause of the disability, but it was not as they thought, Jesus taught them. “*It was not that this man sinned, or his parents.*”

Jesus is not implying that the sins we commit are without consequences. We know it to be otherwise, that when we break the law laid down by our government (operating with an authority from God Himself), we “*incur judgment*” (Rom. 13:2), and that can mean unpleasant punishment. Or if we break God's law, there are temporal consequences: a child is punished; a relationship is strained or broken; a reputation is damaged.

But in this case, the blindness was from birth, and neither the parents nor the man had sinned to cause it. Yet sin remained the culprit, the sin we all inherit from our forebears, the sin that is “a corruption of human nature [so deep] that nothing healthy or uncorrupt remains in man's body or soul, in his inward or outward powers” (Formula of Concord, Epitome, Article I, 8). It's a sin so bad that, besides the corruption of our bodies, it corrupts our souls and would lead to our damnation and eternal death were we “not born anew through Baptism and the Holy Spirit” (Augsburg Confession, Article II:2), that is, were we not healed of our spiritual blindness, minds, hearts, and eyes anointed and washed in the font of regeneration and renewal. As Jesus once spoke to a deaf man, we now say at the font: “*Ephphatha!*” Be opened.

For on this day “*the works of God [were] displayed in [Jesus].*” He was sent to “*work the works of [the Father] who sent [Him] while it is day; night is coming,*” Jesus said, “*when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.*” Jesus brought light back into this man's world, both physically and spiritually. On this Laetare Sunday, we rejoice and praise the Lord for the physical undoing of sin's corruption by Christ's cross and resurrection. It's a foretaste of the redemption of our bodies that awaits all of us in the glory of the resurrection.

But Jesus also addressed the problem of spiritual blindness, for Jesus also said: “*For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind.*” Spiritual blindness is more serious, as I

Jesus Heals Our Blindness, Physical and Spiritual — John 9:1–7, 13–17, 34–39
Page 3 Lent 4a Pastor Douglas Punke
mentioned before, because it leads to damnation and eternal death. And everyone is born with this blindness.

The disciples were. They misunderstood the extent of sin and sin's corrupting power. Jesus healed them by His word.

The man born physically blind was; he was also spiritually blind. He knew a "*man called Jesus*" healed his blindness, but he didn't know who Jesus was (John 9:11). All he could say at first was, "*He is a prophet.*" But later, Jesus found him and took on this spiritual blindness. By His Word, Jesus healed the man of his spiritual blindness; once he "*was blind,*" but Jesus made him "*see*" with the eyes of faith (John 9:25) — "*Lord, I believe*" he said; "I believe that you are the Son of Man," "*and he worshiped [Jesus],*" to the joy of heaven.

The Pharisees were spiritually blind, too, and their blindness was the worst. They knew who Jesus was — by His teaching and miraculous signs, they knew, but they refused to see. Surely, this man wasn't blind at all, they scoffed — his parents testified: he was. Surely, Jesus is a sinner, after all, he had healed a man who was an invalid on the Sabbath; after all, He claimed a glory greater than father Abraham; He claimed to be the Christ; He claimed to have come from God. He blasphemes God; He is a sinner worthy of death. They had picked up stones to kill Him then, but Jesus escaped from their murderous intent.

And these experts in the Scripture should have known. Through the prophet Isaiah, the Lord told them about the servant who would "*give ... a light for the nations,*" and "*open the eyes that are blind*" (Is. 42:6-7), who would "*lead the blind in a way that they do not know*" (Is. 42:16). Through Christ, "*those [like the man born blind] who do not see, ... see.*" On the other hand, He would point out His blind servants like the Pharisees who claimed to see "*many things, but [would] not observe them*" (Is. 42:20). They were truly blind.

Yes, this is the blindness that afflicts us all from birth, but in Christ, the light of His Gospel has shined upon us. We have been washed, and we have been healed. But this disability can revisit us, without constant attention to that Gospel light. Thus, we pray: O Lord, keep us, on whom the light of Christ has shined, from this blindness. Grant that we might ever look to Jesus and confess Him. Grant that we might hear His word of instruction and exhortation and promise, repent and believe, that the blindnesses that remain in us might be washed away along with all guilt, that we might see Jesus ever more clearly, and be accounted righteous in Him. Grant that we might look at one another as God's fellow redeemed and not look down on people according to external traits or disabilities. Yes, Lord, grant that we, who once were in darkness, might now and ever walk as children of light.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.