

Lent 4A: John 9.1-41

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We need to have a heart to heart about Fitbits. I'm not actually sure Fitbits are still a thing, but it's more fun to say Fitbit than Apple Watch or wellness app. I'm talking about those gadgets that keep tabs on your steps and your heart beats and who knows what else. I recently heard an interview with a guy named Thi Nguyen. In a grad school philosophy class once, a professor accused him of confusing a purpose with a goal. Thi thought this was nonsense. There's no difference between purposes and goals. But the prof explained the distinction by saying, "If you invite friends over to your house for a game of cards, the goal is to win the card game but the purpose is to have fun."

This truth is at the heart of what we'll call the Fitbit problem. It's so much easier to count up cards and decide who won the game than it is to count up the fun and decide how good a time was had by all. Thi Nguyen is worried that we've become so obsessed with metrics that we're coming to believe that the only things in our lives that count are the things we can count. But they're not.

Metrics are fine when you need to determine whether you've met a goal. But purpose matters so much more to human flourishing. I used to have an app on my phone that would ring a little bell when I'd logged 15 minutes of prayer. It would then tell me how many hundred hours I'd logged over the past few years and I'd think I should basically be the Dalai Lama by now, which, unfortunately, is just the kind of thing the Dalai Lama would never think. Eventually the goal of racking up minutes on this Insight Timer app felt like it was running counter to the purpose of prayer. Especially as it grew more insistent that deeper enlightenment awaited if I'd just enter a little more personal information and then upgrade to the deluxe version for only \$7.99 a month.

Devices count our steps and heart rates and minutes of REM sleep each night. Vast corporations are tracking our clicks and our likes and our purchase histories. To my knowledge, there's not an app that tracks happiness or joy or kindness or love. And if you run across one that purports to do so, don't buy it. There's just no accounting for the abundant life. There never has been.

"As Jesus walked 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?'" We may dismiss the question with an eye roll. But the disciples are just trying to make sense of their world, aren't they? More specifically, they're trying make sense of the age old problem of human suffering and sickness. How can a child be born blind and grow up having to sit and beg for his living if this universe was created and governed by a good and loving God? "Whose sin is to blame?" is really just a way of asking, "What went wrong here, Jesus?"

The disciples live in the Fitbit moral universe, if you will. If Jesus had answered, "Well, it was the guy's parents. They were both bad eggs," the followup question would probably be, "Well, how big a sin did they commit and how many times did they do this terrible thing that made their child blind?" Can you not understand this desire to understand? Even this hope that

the problem is quantifiable so we can keep it from happening to us. It's not a ridiculous impulse.

At first blush it seems like Jesus is accepting their premise that there is a clear explanation. "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him," is his reply. "Ah," we say. "That makes sense, Jesus. You're telling us that God blinded this man before he was born, which meant his life would be a struggle for a few decades, since this is a world built mostly by and for people who can see. But God did this so you could wander past him one day and heal him, so it was all worth it." I'm not so sure that this is what's happening here at all. In fact, I'm not so sure anymore that God's works are revealed most fully in the restoration of the man's eyesight. Maybe we should take Jesus at his word and believe God's works were revealed in this man. In his whole person.

Because this remarkable human refuses to disbelieve his freshly healed eyes and his deep intuitions about the one who healed him. Even when Jesus did so by spitting on the ground and rubbing saliva mud on the man's face and telling him to go wash it off. Everyone around him let their preconceived systems determine what is possible and rule out everything that's not. But not the man born blind.

The neighbors are confused and take him to the religious authorities, who explain that a righteous person, according to their ethical system, would not have performed such a healing on the sabbath. Mixing up that batch of muddy spittle may have been to make the healing look even more like work, and make sure these official moral scorekeepers take notice. Some of them say, "Furthermore, since this Jesus is clearly a rule breaking sinner, God would never heal anyone through the likes of him! Why, this probably isn't even the guy who used to beg from us at all."

So now the poor parents get dragged in to identify the man, but they don't want to get involved. People are choosing sides and getting angry. This is what happens when the systems and categories we use to make sense of the world are challenged, isn't it? We get angry and we get defensive and, if need be, we find the person whose personhood disrupted everything in the first place, and we drive him out from our midst.

Through all the mayhem, only one character has stayed awake and defiantly open to what was actually taking place. When Jesus hears the healed man has been driven out of town, he goes off in search of him. "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" Jesus asks when he finds him. "Do you trust me?" "Of course I do," says the man born blind. "Of course I trust you. How could I let what people tell me about how things are supposed to be override the healing I've experienced in my very own body through your very hands? I'd follow you anywhere, Jesus. Anywhere. Even away from the assumptions I've always used to make sense of my world."

Here's a question to consider. If everyone always got exactly what they deserved, and the universe finally behaved like we think it should, what would be lost? Well, I think the grace of this moment would be lost. This encounter that a man born blind had with the grace of God in the person of Jesus would be lost. Because the only one in this story to stay open to what's actually taking place is the one who was willing to set aside everything. Set aside everything he'd been taught about who deserves what and everything he'd ever learned about how his moral universe tracked goodness and distributed pain.

There was a quirky, ex-hippy, Jesus freak type who taught economics, of all things, at the evangelical Christian college Ardelle and I attended. Don Balla had qualms about addressing

God as Father. But they weren't qualms about gendered language. They were about formality. You see, the Aramaic word "Abba," which Jesus began the Lord's Prayer with, was a term of endearment that a child might use. So, at the beginning of every class, Dr. Balla would cock his head toward the ceiling a bit and begin his prayer with, "Dad..."

My dear, tolerant, open-minded Episcopalian friends, how does that sit with you? Opening a prayer with "Dad?" I'll go first. It still gives me the full on willies, and I'm the one who brought it up today. It makes me squirm in a way that puts this sincere, if a little goofy, Christian professor into that box in my brain labeled "People I should not turn to for explanations of the way things are." Do you have one of those boxes? Lots of people did in the story we just read, didn't they?

Well, Don Balla also invented a board game. My parents played it with him one night with some of their friends. Some of you knew my dad. Like his oldest son, he was in the religion business. He liked theology and studying the Bible and standing up in classrooms and pulpits and telling people what he had come to understand. I'd rather not point out which characters in today's gospel my Dad and I most resemble.

My mother was a beautiful soul. Even though lots of faithful people prayed to Jesus for many years that she be healed of her multiple sclerosis, God didn't heal her. But God's works were still revealed in her that night. Mom was in a wheelchair by the time she and dad played Don Balla's game, and she didn't speak or think quite as clearly as she once had. But Mom won the game. And here's how. After Don's careful description of the intricate rules and the ultimate goal of being the first person to reach the center of the board, play commenced. And my sweet, generally law-abiding mother didn't even wait for her turn, picked up her game piece and dropped it onto the square marked "Home."

Don Balla said no one had ever won his game so quickly. Because Don Balla's game was made entirely to show us the strange ways of grace. He constructed it in such a way that no one would get safely home by following the rules. The only way home was to drop the very instructions he'd just given about how the game was supposed to work, and just go home. Because that's how Grace works. That's how we'll see Jesus. Not by satisfying a set of moral requirements or religious instructions. You just go home.

I no longer think the story of the man born blind answers questions about how the moral universe is supposed to work. It doesn't settle the matter of who deserves to be healed from what and why. It's telling us the wild and unruly truth that we may have to walk away from our sense making systems and the precious rules of our religious games if we're ever to live by the light of grace. We may even have to walk away from our prejudices and assumptions about what kind of misfit characters God might use to reach us.

Maybe we each begin to live by grace when we find our own way to say, "I do not know whether he is a sinner, or a fundamentalist, or a radical, or any other category of people I've ruled out as vessels God might use. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see that only grace," as I think an old song says, "will lead me home."