

26th March 2017 Sermon Notes *John chapter 9 verses 1-41*

Georgia, Georgia The whole day through Just an old sweet song Keeps Georgia on my mind.

I said Georgia, Georgia A song of you Comes as sweet and clear As moonlight through the pines.

Ray Charles was a charismatic and immensely-talented singer-songwriter and performer. He lost his sight due to glaucoma at the tender age of 7, but through the aid and encouragement, especially of his mother, and through his own force of will, Ray triumphed in the music field. But, in the face of his success, one of the issues raised in his life is *why* a black child already born into poverty becomes blind. Why is this allowed to happen? Is it something he did or didn't do? Is it something his parents did or didn't do?

Ray Charles died in June 2004, just months before the film of life 'Ray' premiered in October of that year. In the film, Ray is having an argument with his wife Bea. Bea pleads, *"The only thing that can help you is God, Ray!"* But he quickly turns on her: *"Don't you talk about God! You have any idea how it feels to go blind and still be afraid of the dark. And every day, you stand and pray just for a little light, and you don't get nothing. Cause God don't listen to people like me."* Bea warns, *"Stop talking like that."* But he presses on, *"As far as I'm concerned, me and God is even, and I do what I damn well please."*

These tensions are not new. Jesus and his disciples meet a man blind from birth. His disciples ask, "Teacher, whose sin caused him to be born blind? Was it his own or his parents' sin?"

The disciples are expressing a bigotry common for the time. Some people have sought to associate sin and disability with a particular reading of Leviticus, where there is a frequent connection made between physical disability and impurity. The disciples seem to be questioning Jesus from this point of view, but as is so often the case, Jesus listens to the question, then reframes the situation.

Jesus refuses to accept the false dilemma presented by his followers: Do you pick (a) this man is blind because of his own sin, or (b) this man is blind because of his parents' sin? If this were a multiple choice test, then Jesus did the equivalent of scribbling a third option in the margin and circling it: (c) "Neither this man nor his parents sinned." Then he offers another choice (d): "He was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him." This seems to be a similar tack to that of Paul, who described in Roman 8 of how God is present in all things working for the good — not necessarily the cause of all things, but *present* in all things, working to make them better.

Nancy Eiesland, Professor of Sociology of Religion was born with a congenital bone defect, underwent numerous operations in her youth and experienced considerable pain as well as disability. These factors informed her theological perspective that God is disabled, she died of lung cancer at age 44.

She wrote

Growing up with a disability, I could not accept the traditional interpretations of disability that I heard in prayers, in Sunday school, and in sermons. "You are special in God's eyes," I was often told, "that's why you were given this painful disability." Or, "Don't worry about your suffering now—in heaven you will be made whole." I was assured that God gave me a disability to develop my character. But by age six or seven, I was convinced that I had enough character to last a lifetime. My family frequented faith healers with me in tow. I was never healed. People asked about my hidden sins, but they must have been so well hidden that even I misplaced them. The theology that I heard was inadequate to my experience.

The importance of disabled theology — especially those who themselves are disabled — is giving voice to those with disabilities who have often been silenced. You have people writing theology in light of their experiences with their neighbours, with God, and with their disability.

Their reflections help empower the disabled to speak and advocate for themselves instead of others speaking for and about them.

There is a similar shift in the Gospel text for today. The scripture reading begins with the disciples *talking about* the man born blind from birth. Then we see His neighbours, then, and the people who had seen him begging *talking about* him. Finally, the man speaks for himself. He confesses that he doesn't know the answers to all of their questions, but he adds, "One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." This formerly blind man's words have been made famous by John Newton, who quoted him in his hymn "Amazing Grace": "[I once...] was blind, but now I see."

There is a vital shift in that the marginalized blind man is healed and empowered to speak for himself, but Jesus presses the shift even further: *"I came to this world to judge, so that the blind should see and those who see should become blind"* The religious leaders gathered around him are incredulous: *"Surely we are not blind, are we?"* Jesus responds *"If you were blind, then you would not be guilty; but since you claim that you can see, this means that you are still guilty"*

This is a tremendous reversal. Jesus is saying, not only do I come to give eyes to see and ears to hear, but also, I come to give blindness — or put another way — to reveal the blindness of those who think their sight and judgment is perfect. By saying, *"We see,"* the first-century religious leaders crowded around Jesus were revealing their own sin and prejudice in their eagerness to connect sin with the physical blindness of another. Jesus radically undercuts their position even further by saying, *"If you were blind, you would not have sin."* Suddenly, this blind beggar is shown as one with keen sight and judgment about what (and who) is really important in life, and the metaphorical blindness of the religious leaders is unmasked. In this sense, Jesus seeks to proclaim, *not only "recovery of sight to the blind,"* but also the recognition of blindness in the seeing.

This story is not just about a blind man being healed once upon a time in a land far away. It would be significant if it were just about the past, but it is even more important because it continues to teach us today. This story of healing from 2000 years ago continues to challenge us to recognize the ways in which we are blind and can't recognize our blindness — and the ways in which we are wrong about the blindness of others. As Jesus said elsewhere in the Sermon on the Mount: *"Why do you see the speck in your neighbour's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? We definitely have a log-speck situation with the scripture this morning.*

The joy of this morning's text is that there is hope. There is hope in the case of John Newton in the eighteenth century, who quoted the blind man in John saying that even if I don't know much else, I do know that *"[I once...] was blind, but not I see."* Newton wrote this and the other lines of *"Amazing Grace"* as an autobiographical reflection on his conversion from being a slave trader.

Ray Charles was far from a perfect man. He was unfaithful he had twelve children with nine different women He was addicted to heroin for sixteen years. Ray responded to the saga of his drug use and reform with the songs *"I Don't Need No Doctor"*, *"Let's Go Get Stoned"*, and the release of *Crying Time*, his first album since having kicked his heroin addiction in 1966.

There is a scene in the film. in 1962 Ray was being escorted to the Bell Auditorium in Augusta, Georgia, where he was scheduled to perform, but the building was being picketed by a group protesting that the concert was going to be segregated with only whites allowed on the main dance floor and blacks restricted to the balcony. A young black man managed to get Ray's attention through the noise of the crowd chanting *"NO MORE SEGREGATION!"* Ray's response was *"That's how it is. This is Georgia"* and *"Look man, there ain't nothing I can do about that. I'm an entertainer."* But there was a moment when the white organizer of the concert interrupted their conversation to put-down the protester — and, suddenly, Ray began to see. He confessed to his manager, *"He's right"* and ordered the band back on the tour bus. When the organiser of the concert threatened to sue him, Ray reversed and now said to the organiser, *"I can't do nothing about it. Ain't nothing I can do, man."* He remained physically blind, but saw for the first time what he could do to help in the struggle *against* racism and *for* Civil Rights.

The promoter went on to sue Ray for breach of contract, and Ray was fined \$757. The following year, Ray did perform at a desegregated Bell Auditorium concert on 23 October 1963,¹

*I Said Georgia, oh Georgia No peace I find Just an old sweet song Keeps Georgia on my mind
Other arms reach out to me Other eyes smile tenderly Still in peaceful dreams I see
The road leads back to you*

Our challenge continues to be in this season of Lent to make space in our lives to listen for God's call — the places in our living where God is calling us to confess with our mouth:

"I do not have all the answers, but 'One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.'"