

# SECOND PRESBYTERIAN

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## ***“Blind”***

*John 9*

**George C. Anderson**

John is the Gospel of long conversations. Chapter 9 is different though. Chapter 9 isn't one long conversation but a series of conversations, all having to do with a man blind from birth. We are not given the man's name, but because it would be tiresome for me to keep saying, and for you to keep hearing, “[the man born blind](#)”, will use the name tradition has given him: Celidonius.

Anyway, in chapter 9,

- you hear conversations where people talk *about* Celidonius: disciples, neighbors;
- and conversations *with* Celidonius:
  - Jesus, in a kind way;
  - Pharisees, in an interrogating way.

Let's listen in, and let's listen for God's voice:

As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. <sup>2</sup> His disciples asked him, “[Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?](#)” <sup>3</sup> Jesus answered, “[Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.](#)” <sup>4</sup> [We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work.](#) <sup>5</sup> [As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.](#)” <sup>6</sup> When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, <sup>7</sup> saying to him, “[Go, wash in the pool of Siloam](#)” (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. <sup>8</sup> The 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?”<sup>9</sup> Some were saying, “It is he.” Others were saying, “No, but it is someone like him.” He kept saying, “I am he.”<sup>10</sup> But they kept asking him, “Then how were your eyes opened?”<sup>11</sup> He 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.”<sup>12</sup> They said to him, “Where is he?” He said, “I do not know.”

<sup>13</sup> They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. <sup>14</sup> Now it was a Sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. <sup>15</sup> Then 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.”<sup>16</sup> Some of the Pharisees said, “This man is not from God, for he does not observe the Sabbath.” Others said, “How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?” And they were divided. <sup>17</sup> So they said again to the blind man, “What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.” He said, “He is a prophet.”

<sup>18</sup> The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight <sup>19</sup> and asked them, “Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?”<sup>20</sup> His parents answered, “We know that this is our son and that he was born blind,<sup>21</sup> but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.”<sup>22</sup> His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. <sup>23</sup> Therefore his parents said, “He is of age; ask him.”

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

<sup>35</sup> Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?”<sup>36</sup> He answered, “And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.”<sup>37</sup> Jesus said to him, “You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.”<sup>38</sup> He said, “Lord, I believe.” And he worshiped him. <sup>39</sup> Jesus said, “I came into this world for judgment, so that those who do not see may see and those who do see may become blind.”<sup>40</sup> Some of the Pharisees who were with him heard this and said to him, “Surely we are not blind, are we?”<sup>41</sup> Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would not have sinned. But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.”



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See what I mean? A chapter of conversations.

The conversations begin with a question. Notice that the question is not, “[Was this man blind since birth?](#)” Everybody knows that already. Celidonium probably lived outside the walls of Jerusalem all his life, and his neighbors are used to seeing him *not seeing them*. His situation is so well known, even the disciples know he has been blind since birth. No, how long he has been blind is not a *conversation-starter*.

What is a conversation-starter is to ask the kind of questions his parents probably asked when Celidonium was born:

- “[Why?](#)” and
- “[Why does he deserve this. He’s just a baby.](#)”
- “[What did we do to deserve this?](#)”

These questions raise issues, and we love to debate the issues. And the #1 issue here is about responsibility. A tower crumbles and kills everyone in it, and Jesus is asked by his disciples if the people who died did anything wrong. Maui is devastated by fire and we know that at least 115 have died. If you have a news feed, you have already seen the headlines asking who is responsible?

There is always a right and a left to these debates. I don’t know which disciples lean left or right, or how far they do. I do know that if someone is born not able to see that it is a problem for those who lean left because, as Jonathan Haidt points out, the #1 moral issue for liberals is “Fairness.” If everyone is equal in God’s eyes, everyone should have an equal chance at life. Everyone should have equal access, be given the same opportunities, be treated the same way... so it is a real theological issue if someone is born with an unfair disability or disadvantage. “[What does that say about us if we don’t fix it, and what does that say about God if God caused it?](#)”

That the man was born blind is a problem for those who lean right because for the conservatives of Jesus’ day, there is a right way to live and a wrong way. Those who live the right way deserve the blessings they earn and those who live the wrong way deserve their disadvantages. What looks unfair- that some have more blessings than others- is simply evidence of the difference hard work and right living can make. There has to be an explanation of this man’s disadvantage- a spin that will justify their view of how life is supposed to work. Scripture does say, after all, that the sins of a generation will be passed on like an inheritance to future generations. A “sin audit” needs to be done. “[Is Celidonium blind because something is wrong with him or because of something his parents did?](#)”

Asking if blame or responsibility should be placed on Celidonium or his parents sounds silly in this passage. But look how we talk today about the systemic, generational, problems of poverty, sexism, racism, and education. We know that children can be born into lives that will be easy or hard based on circumstances that are not of their choosing. We have our ways of asking if their difficulties are their problems they need to work through, or problems that have come of generational injustice that others need to address.



This is the kind of debate that the disciples are having. Different perspectives, important questions and important issues, and Jesus answers their question, he discusses the issue. But Jesus sees Celidonius.

- While issues of the border and of refugees are debated (and it is an important debate),
  - Jesus sees the migrant and the refugee. He might even learn their names.
- While gun violence is debated,
  - Jesus sees the one who is shot,
  - and he sees the shooter.
- While education is debated,
  - Jesus sees the boy who comes hungry to school every day,
  - and the girl who wants to hurt herself because of how she has been shamed online.

We hear the debate go on among the disciples and neighbors. Celidonius begs every day.

- “With the way things are, is that the only way he can survive?”
- “Maybe he should not be using his being blind to manipulate others. Maybe there is something else he can do to help himself?”
- “And where’s his family? Isn’t he their responsibility?”

Jesus sees Celidonius and that he can help.

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Let’s move past the disciples and neighbors who *talk about* Celidonius to the Pharisees who talk *to* Celidonius.

They come across pretty callous, don’t they? But let’s be careful not to make caricatures of them. First of all, not all Pharisees of Jesus’ day are as legalistic and graceless as these. You know how it is. It is always the extremists who give groups a bad name. I’m a preacher, I lead a congregation. Believe me, I am embarrassed by so many who speak for the church these days. I’m not just talking about preachers who are not Presbyterian, though some of them say things that I don’t even recognize as being biblical. I’m talking about some Presbyterians too.

I bet some of you are embarrassed by some of those who speak on behalf of your political party. Those of you who are on social media, have you ever read posts by people whom you agree with, but who are so rude and obnoxious that it makes you want to switch sides?

These Pharisees in our passage, they’re extreme.. They are like a dog with a bone, or a tickle in the throat when you’re in worship. They won’t give up. Jesus has to be wrong and they have to be right- no in-between.

Celidonius was blind at birth and now he can see. This is not supposed to happen. As far as anyone knows, this has never happened. As far as they can see, this never will happen. The Pharisees need to know how this happened... if it even happened at all. How they go about finding explanations is a classic example of confirmation bias: accepting only what supports what



they already believe. Choosing a side, taking a stand, making a commitment; and then using what they already know as the means by which to judge whether evidence is true or false.

They ask Celidonius questions but only accept answers that support what they already know. “Mud,” he answers. “Spit, dirt, and a man who made it happen.”

This answer doesn’t fit, so it won’t do. When Celidonius offers a suggestion, that Jesus is a prophet, that won’t do either. That won’t do because the Pharisees already know that whatever Jesus did, he did on the Sabbath, and they have a position about such things. They’ve already taken a stand about this. Unless there is a life-threatening problem, or unless there is going to be an economic impact- like your donkey falling in a ditch- no work is to be done. Whatever Jesus did could wait till Monday (I know that their Sabbath wasn’t Sunday, but let’s not get bogged in details).

What is important is that if they have decreed that work is not to be done on the Sabbath, and work- even good work- is done on the Sabbath, then their authority to declare what is right and what is wrong is being challenged and clearly Jesus is opposing their stand on the Sabbath issue. “[A prophet? A prophet? Are you saying Jesus is of God? A man of God wouldn’t violate the Sabbath.](#)”

In their cause of confirmation-bias, they track down his parents and interrogate them. Poor parents. You know how it is when an extremist gets in your grill, when you’re in one of those conversations you can’t get out of unless you surrender. That’s what the parents find themselves in, and you can hear the squirm in their answers.

“[Was your son born blind?](#)”

“[Yes, he was. We were there.](#)”

“[How did it happen that he was healed?](#)”

“[We don’t know, we weren’t there. It’s a mystery to us too. Go ask him. He’s an adult. He can speak for himself.](#)”

Dog with a bone, tickle in the throat, these guys won’t let go and so that’s just what they do, they go back and interrogate Celidonius again, ask him the exact same question again, demanding that he change his answer so that their authority is honored, their stand holds, and their version of what happened be sustained.

It doesn’t go well. Celidonius has something his intimidated parents didn’t have: a backbone.

Well, that’s not nice or fair. I’m a big advocate of not engaging

- with zealots in their zeal,
- with extremists in their extreme,
- with hot heads in their heat...

and the way this conversation plays out supports my strategy. Celidonius makes a reasonable point- that Jesus did a godly thing and he ought to get some credit for doing so- and they answer not with a response but with a personal attack. “[We know Moses, and you don’t, so don’t try to teach us anything. We’re right and you are nothing but a sinner so keep your options about God to yourself. Oh, and get out!](#)”





Like talking about the issues, taking stands is something we all do. But what is it about where the Pharisees are standing that doesn't let them see that maybe it is a good thing that a man blind from birth now sees? How do we get to this place where we so quickly dismiss the credibility and dismiss the evidence of those who are not standing with us? What keeps these Pharisees from celebrating something that has to be of God even though it took place on God's day?

“Now look whose spinning,” the Pharisees might say. “Look whose articles, Calls for Discipleship and sermons encourage folks to set Sunday aside and come back to church. You've given

the theological reasons- a day is set aside for worship.

the justice reasons- People need a day off. The land needs time off.

the mindfulness reasons- We need to re-set in life,

the psychological reasons: We need to have a day about being, not doing.”

Wow, those Pharisees are irritating. And that's why I want to walk away from the conversation. It is easy to do so because I have defined them, and this allows me to put them in boxes and walk away. They are nothing but confirmation-bias seeking, Zero-sum arguing, virtue signaling, ad hominem attacking Pharisees. “Get out!”

But that is what the Pharisees did to Jesus, isn't it. Jesus was just as irritating to them. Because of what Jesus was saying, they put him in a box, condemned him, and set him aside.

And let's admit it, Jesus doesn't cooperate in the whole passage.

He asks the same question over and over again: “What about Celidonius?”

- The disciples want to talk about cause and effect, what is fair and who is responsible, and the neighbors want to know what happened and why it happened on the Sabbath.
- The Pharisees argue about who has the authority to heal someone only God can heal and who has the authority to say what is of God.

But Jesus sees Celidonius. Issues are important to discuss and stands sometimes need to be taken, but Jesus keeps going back to the one who raised the issues and caused stands to be taken, the one others talk *about* or talk. Disciples have questions, neighbors are freaked out, the Pharisees get engaged, passion is high, arguments are had, stands are taken—who knows, the Pharisees might have written a position paper or two- but Jesus sees Celidonius, gets his hands dirty, and helps him.

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From what I know of my predecessors, and certainly what I know of the congregation I have inherited and served, here is something I value about this congregation. We are a church that highly values education and reflection. I love that. We have lively conversations about issues here, and that is wonderful, because as books like *Toxic Charity* point out, great harm is often done in trying to do good in an ignorant way. Studying and talking about issues is important.



But I do think that this church has, for the most part, realized that what is of utmost importance is not that we get to a “Before Place” before doing anything. We don’t insist on getting to the place where we all agree before doing anything. Even while we are talking about it, we try to do something about it..

- Prisons. We don’t all agree on policing and incarceration. But I thank God
  - for the prison ministry for which Gene Edmunds was a chaplain and which we support still,
  - and for Fred Genhemier’s work in helping inmates stay in touch with their loved ones to remind them why they should not only want to leave prison and stay out,
  - and for the program that Jen Brothers helped start, and Cynthia Lawrence has been a part of, where recently released inmates learn skills that help them get jobs and provide for themselves.

We’ve helped. So much more needs to be understood and done, but praise God for that we have been able to help some inmates, all of whom have names and real needs.

Immigration. Boy, have there been debates about immigration, undocumented workers and whether or not Syrian war refugees should be allowed to enter this country. We haven’t figured out those issues. But isn’t it wonderful that while these debates go on, we’ve been able to help

- immigrants who have brought to Roanoke or housed at Massanetta,
- undocumented workers in Florida,
- and Syrian war refugees through a special offering,
  - all of whom have names and real needs?

Education. We debate education all the time: Public vs. Private; Is it wise to move away from the liberal arts, teacher pay, Standards of learning (do we teach to the test), curriculum and its content. These are important issues. I know, I’m married to a teacher. But meanwhile, look at what we can do to help the Morningside School. We heard the Minute for Mission when we’ve been told how we can make a positive difference right now and make it different.

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I had several more examples, but I don’t like out preaching my welcome by going too long. I just want to leave you with the suggestion that we continue to keep our priorities straight. How blessed we are not to be a church that is not so focused on survival that there is little more we can do than talk about issues and maybe take a stand or two. While issues are being discussed and stands being taken all around us, let’s try to remain the body of believers that follows Jesus in talking about the issues, but follow him also into seeing the person—seeing the need—and going ahead and doing something to help.

