

March 19, Lent 4A (John 9:1-41)

The light of the world illumines those who are open but is opaque to those who claim powerful position.

by [Lynn Jost](#) in the [March 2023](#) issue

In his 1973 classic *Whatever Became of Sin?*, psychiatrist Karl Menninger confronted contemporary circumlocutions for evil, urging readers to redefine sin. In John 9 when Jesus' disciples ask him about sin, Jesus redirects the conversation to God's works, illuminated by the light of the world—but he does not avoid the word sin. Jesus concludes this week's narrative by confronting sin: the sin of rejecting one sent by God.

In a five-act drama—the sign (vv. 1–7), neighbors' questions (8–12), Pharisees' questions (13–17), questioning of the parents (18–23), redirected Pharisees' questions of the healed man (24–34), and Jesus' questions (35–41)—the light of the world illumines those who are open but is opaque to those who claim powerful position. In *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, Gail O'Day challenges preachers to mimic John's narrative technique by inviting the audience to “overhear the gospel” (with credit to Fred Craddock) without prosaic, plastic pronouncements about the moral of the story.

Some scholars maintain that John 9 addresses Jewish believers who have been banished from the synagogue. The congregation of which I am a member faces banishment from our denomination. As the congregation experiences a call to be more inclusive, we have adopted the line, “Jesus welcomes all; so do we.” Our pastor abbreviates the threefold Anabaptist confession—Jesus at the center of our faith, community at the center of our life, and reconciliation at the center of our work—to three verbs: *belonging*, *inquiring*, *transforming*. The three terms are potential troublemakers—in John's community and in ours.

Belonging is contested in John 9. The man's parents avoid offending the authorities because they know "that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah" would face expulsion. In the inaugural issue of the journal *Othering and Belonging* (2016), John Powell and Stephen Menendian declare that "the problem of the twenty-first century is the problem of 'othering,'" of engendering "marginality and persistent inequality across any of the full range of human differences based on group identities." Othering discriminates against those outside the privileged power structures. John's audience is called to offer belonging instead. Jesus Christ "has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall" (Eph. 2:14). Jesus welcomes all.

Transforming describes discipleship, following Jesus in community. Engaging the light of the world transforms the healed man and leads to greater inclusion. Transformation empowers bold witness. The transformed man embodies the goal of John's Gospel—"that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God . . . and have life" (20:31). The transformed community practices hospitality and puts the marginalized orphan, widow, and alien at the center of community.

Inquiring is marked in John 9 by the frequent use of questions. The disciples ask about theodicy. The neighbors inquire about the identity of the healed man and of his healer. The religious leaders begin with an appropriate if suspicious question about the sign, but their interrogation deteriorates into accusation and exclusion. When the one healed inquires of Jesus, he believes and confesses.

Inquiring has been one of the most dangerous characteristics of our congregation. We often ask questions about walls of exclusion. Past issues include: Should we exclude based on the mode of baptism (immersion is our practice)? Should we exclude the divorced (even if they're our own children)? Should we exclude women from pastoral leadership (maybe with some exceptions)? What about those who name racism as sin (Black Lives Matter is based on critical race theory, the critics say, and both are forbidden)? Recently, the question of accepting LGBTQ people as members and leaders (now you've gone too far!) has become forbidden territory, leading to exclusion.

A leader in our community describes coming home from the US Marine Corps on leave. His visit to his parents' home was complicated by the fact that he was coming out as a gay man—thus, he thought, unworthy of the body and blood of the Lord. In his words, "As the elements went past me, I didn't take them. My dad turned to me, took his bread, and broke it in half. He handed it to me and said, 'The Lord loves you

and accepts you.' With that gesture he invited me to receive communion with them."

Jesus opens the community to all who seek the light of the world. Jesus confronts sin, the sin that rejects those sent by God. Jesus welcomes all into this renewed people of God. So do we.