

Lent in Art

A Visual Devotional

Assareto

Christ Healing the Blind Man

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Instructions

Monday

Read John 9 and compare the account with the painting.

Read the section that is entitled “The Reading.” This will help you gain insight into the painting.

Read “The Contemplation” section entitled “Creation Elements.”

Wednesday

If desired, Re-read John 9. This story is full of details and deserves several readings.

Take another look at the painting, in particular pay attention to Jesus and the blind man.

Friday

Read “The Contemplation” section entitled “Seeing Elements.”

Kids Activity

In the book of Genesis God created Adam and Eve. The creation story tells us that God formed Adam out of the dust of the ground and then breathed life into him.

The Gospel’s are full of accounts of Jesus healing people. Healings are re-creations. Jesus creates again, restoring people to a place of health.

In this story we find Jesus using mud to heal the man’s blindness. Jesus combines the dust of the earth and the spit from his mouth. There is a connection between God breathing life into man, and God using the moisture (spit) in his mouth to create the mud.

So today we are going to create out of mud that we make, it will be a bit gross, and consider some questions about the story that this painting is based on.

First, take a mirror or piece of glass and breathe heavily onto it. You can see the moisture from your breath begin to make water droplets on the glass. You’ve probably also observed this in the bathroom when the mirror fogs over when someone takes a shower. Breath is also moisture.

Go outside and get a little dirt. Now spit into the dirt until you make a bit of mud. If you are brave you can mix it with your fingers like Jesus did, or you can use a spoon.

How would you feel about someone smearing mud and spit on your eyes? DON’T spread mud on your eyes, but you might want to spread it on your arm just to get an idea of what the blind man experienced.

Discussion Questions



Do you think it's odd that Jesus did that?

Can you see the connections to God making Adam with dirt and breath, and then re-creating or healing the blind man with dirt and spit?

While it's kind of funny, the important part is that Jesus could re-create the blind man, not just his eyes, but also his spirit by telling him that it wasn't his sin that caused his blindness. How do you think the blind man felt when he heard that?

Let's look at the various groups in the story. You would think that everyone would be thrilled, jumping up and down excited, that this blind man they knew and saw begging each day had been healed...but they weren't. How did his neighbors respond? How did the priest at the temple respond? How did his parents respond?

How do you think the blind man felt about people's responses?

At the end of the story we find out that the man, after he was healed, was kicked out of the temple. Basically, that means he was kicked out of his church and was alone without his family and friends. When Jesus heard that that is what happened he went and looked for the man and found him. What do you think about this part of the story? How do you feel knowing that Jesus searches for you when you are hurting?



The Reading

Christ Healing the Blind Man, Giochino Assereto (1640)

Background

Giochino Assereto was an Italian painter active in Genoa in the first half of the 17th century. He was heavily influenced by Caravaggio, and the baroque style of Rubens and Van Dyck. This translates into a dramatic use of light and a heightened emotionalism bringing immediacy to his work.

Today we will be examining Assereto's work, The Healing of the Blind Man. This fascinating story is told in the gospel of John, Chapter 9.



Jesus Sees

The moment that Assereto has chosen for his work is of Christ placing mud onto the blind man's eyes. Prior to this, in the blind man's hearing, a discussion has occurred where the disciples ask Jesus who had sinned, this man or his parents. As the man had been born blind the belief was sin had caused his blindness.



I'm sure this man had heard this discussion before and had internalized the message that he was tainted. He was forced to live out his life as a blind beggar filled with shame for his sinful state.

Jesus words, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him." must have been a balm to his soul.

Before the moment in the painting, before Jesus heals his body, Jesus begins to heal his spirit. Beyond the statement that it was not his sin that led to his state, but that God was going to use him to show his glory must have seemed an idea that was beyond belief.

Our painting depicts the next moments of the story. Jesus spat on the ground, made some mud, and spread it on the man's eyes.

The Onlookers (But Do They See?)

In this work Assereto has pictured the scene with four onlookers, likely disciples, closely watching. If we divide the painting horizontally into thirds we see that all of the adults heads are painted into the top third of the painting. There is no background, and much of the canvas is blank and dark, but this top third is packed with all of the onlookers. This placement serves to highlight a surprising 5th onlooker.

My favorite element in the painting is the charming addition of a young child. Children are honest, curious, and unaware of propriety. This child has decided he needs a closer look, who wouldn't, and has pushed himself into the center of the action where he can get an unimpeded view of what Jesus is doing.

I imagine most children would be intrigued by an adult spitting in the dirt and making mud. Then to see that adult pick up the mud and smear it across someone's eyes must have been riveting. The adults in the painting are so caught up in the action that no one seems to have noticed the child pushing his way in.

The child in the painting holds a cup which raises the possibility that he is a beggar as well, perhaps a relative of the blind man and he's been sitting with him when this startling encounter occurs. The child's arm wraps around the blind man and his face shows concern, so we can assume he knows the man. In many ways the child, aside from Christ, is the only one in the story who sees the blind man as a human being, not just as a curiosity.

The other onlookers are equally fascinated. The man that really draws our attention is the one just above the blind man's face. His expression shows amazement and a sense of intense scrutiny. This is likely a disciple who perhaps feels he should take notes as he may be called to heal a blind man. Despite Jesus performing many miracles this man's face reminds us that healings are always astonishing to witness.



The Re-Creation

The interplay between Jesus and the blind man is striking. Jesus is intent, looking fixedly upon the man. His arm, clothed in red, draws a line across the center of the painting. The blind man leans back as though pushed; we are almost afraid he'll topple over. His arm, the brightest spot in the painting, is clothed in a white shirt and creates a line parallel to Christ's arm.

The two arms, slashes of color, reminds me that the blood of Christ washes the sinner clean giving him robes that are whiter than snow.

Jesus and the blind man also mirror one another in their positioning, both leaning and creating parallel lines. The other figures in the painting are either neutral or leaning the other direction. This shift unites Jesus and the blind man in the drama that is unfolding.

The hand of Christ bears a resemblance to the hand of God painted by Michelangelo on the Sistine Ceiling. Over 100 years have passed since Michelangelo finished that famous ceiling, and the images were well known throughout Italy. God's hand, one finger extended, shows the moment he imparts life, or creates, Adam and has been referenced in artwork in the centuries since.

In our painting Christ is about to recreate the eyes of this man, and in a very real way, recreate the man's entire life. The appearance of the hand reminding one of the hand of God, and the moment of creation is subtle, yet powerful. Redemption is always a story of recreation and rebirth, movement from death to life.

The Light Shines on Those Who See

The painting itself is very dark, reminding us of the darkness that the blindman lives in. This story occurs during the day, yet the background is pitch black. The subject of this painting is going to take a very literal journey from blindness into sight.

Visual artists are limited in the ways they can communicate their message. One of the powerful ways they do this is by contrasting light and dark. In particular, religious artists often used dark colors or areas of the canvas to indicate man's lost state. Our understanding is darkened, and we are stumbling about in a fallen world.

And, again, light in paintings is frequently used not just as a practical device to allow us to see the figures, but as a metaphor for salvation, understanding, and God's glory.

In this work the light source appears to be in the left foreground as if a spotlight has been shown on a tableau, but we should note that the figure most illuminated by the light is the blindman. It's as if Assereto wants us to understand that the blindman is moving into the light, or into his ability to see.

However, given the way John tells the story, we can also read the light on Jesus and the blindman, as an indication of who can actually see. In the story Jesus flips the narrative telling us that the blind man



sees clearly and recognizes Christ for who he is. The religious leaders and other onlookers are the ones whose understanding is clouded and thus they stand in the shadows, unable to see clearly.

The Contemplation

Creation elements

Genesis 2:7: Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.

A theme that runs through the gospel of John (and other gospels) is the new creation narrative. John's gospel opens with the familiar Genesis opening, "In the beginning..." It is carried through the book in many ways, in our story here it is in the weird spitting on the ground to make clay to rub on the blind man's eyes. Is this really necessary? Can't Jesus simply command the man to see like he commanded the sea to be still, the demons to come out, the dead to rise? Why the added dramatics?

The use of dirt and clay is a direct reminder of the creative activity of God in Genesis 2. This mirrors just about every ancient culture's view of the creation of man, that God created man from the ground/clay. So Jesus, reaching down and spitting on the dirt to make clay, is making a claim. As God created man, so Jesus offers new creation to man. This theme could be considered a foundational idea in Paul's theology (Galatians 6:12-16, 2 Corinthians 5:14-19, Ephesians 2:10-22, Ephesians 4:17-24, and Colossians 3:1-11).

The blind man's eyes were physically recreated into eyes that see. His spirit was recreated by Jesus, in essence, dismissing his sin as the reason for his disability and affirming his value. The blind man's religious identity was recreated when the Jewish leaders kicked him out of the temple, Jesus sought him out, and the blind man declared his allegiance to Christ and worshipped Him.

One of the ways to read the gospels is to see the life of Christ as a creation narrative. All that God created was declared good and yet we see the corruption of creation addressed by Jesus. Beginning with the encounter with the devil, Jesus begins a redemptive work that is aimed at righting the ills of the world. He exercises authority over creation, overcomes the devil, and here, in dramatic fashion, heals the blind man using the same elements that God used to create man in the first place. Jesus recreates (redeems) that which is marred in creation.



Seeing Elements

The issue of blindness is the obvious subject of John 9 and the painting. The man is blind, Jesus heals him. It represents a new creation activity of God in Jesus. But in classic John fashion, it is not only a great story, there more than meets the eye (see what I did there?)

- The first blindness: The man born blind.
- The second blindness: Who do we blame for this?
- The third blindness: Nobody sees the man, in fact he is not a man, he is an object, a blind beggar.

The first miracle: Jesus sees and handles the man. I asked the question above: why not just declare him healed? This healing is personal. Jesus makes a salve and as the painting so adroitly displays, invades his personal space, his most vulnerable space, and massages clay onto him. The painting dramatically portrays this intrusion.

The experience of walking past a homeless person, trying to avoid eye contact, walking around to avoid intruding into their space, is nearly universal. I'd venture that the normal response is to benignly ignore the person sitting on the sidewalk, and if we do give them some money, we do it in a rather anonymous way. We don't stop to really look at them or to engage in conversation. In many ways we deny them their humanity.

The same holds true for this blind man, he sits at the gate begging, but is not really 'seen.' No one notices him, even if they give him a coin or two, he doesn't exist as a unique individual created in the image of God. We have confirmation of that when we see the responses of those in his community.

In a visual sense, people lean away from the man, not into him. NOT Jesus, he leans in, all the way in. This is the shocking aspect of the painting. Jesus leans in so far that the blind man is forced to lean back. Assereto has made the encounter awkward. And these encounters always are. Jesus SEES the man, leans into him, touches him.

I was a bit disturbed to note that not even the disciples 'saw' the man. In the opening of the story they are discussing his sin as if he's not present. Imagine people walking past a homeless man discussing whether he's a drug addict or mentally ill, with no regard as to whether they are overheard.

This man, who evidently everyone knew was blind since birth, was a part of the community, yet, once he is healed his neighbors are questioning whether it is the same man. They literally don't recognize him. This tells us just how 'unseen' he has been in his life. I'd say there was more of an illusion that he was part of the community, he was always kept at a distance.

Then when they learn that it is him, do they celebrate with him, give him a hug, praise God? No! They question, debate, and haul him to the temple. Their reaction speaks to their lack. They do not see a fellow human who has suffered greatly and is now healed. Even now they don't see the man.



The Jewish leaders, when confronted with the man won't affirm it is the same man. They don't "see" him, so they call the parents to bear witness. Most distressingly, even his parents distance themselves from their son and his healing, they also don't "see" him because of their fear of being ostracized.

The irony of the story is prominent. The blind man is made to see, those around him are blind to the creator who made him see.

Jesus, in contrast, doesn't just see the man, when he is set out of the temple Jesus "looks" for him. Jesus searches until he finds the man. In their exchange Jesus pronounces judgement on the religious leaders who claim to 'see' and yet remain blind. (9:39-41)

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