

Holy One,

As we inhale your grace, we exhale your mercy. As we shape and mold this clay, we feel the very earth between our hands and we remember when, in the beginning, you stooped low to scoop up the dust of the earth and breathe into it the breath of life. As we create and journey through this sacred story today, may you once again breathe new life in us again, opening our eyes to see the world anew. For this, O God, is both our greatest offering and our humblest prayer, “From dust we have come, and to dust we shall return.” Amen.

And now, as we continue to shape and mold this clay in whatever ways we feel inspired, let us listen for God speaking to us in the story of Jesus healing a blind man in John’s gospel, chapter 9.

1 As Jesus walked along, he saw a man who was blind from birth. 2 Jesus’ disciples asked, “Rabbi, who sinned so that he was born blind, this man or his parents?”

3 Jesus answered, “Neither he nor his parents, but that the works of God may be revealed in him.

4 While it’s daytime, we must do the works of the One who sent me. Night is coming when no one can work. 5 While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” 6 After he said this, he spit on the ground, made mud with the saliva, and smeared the mud on the man’s eyes.

7 Jesus said to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (this word means sent). So the man went away and washed. When he returned, he could see.

[SLIDE]

Before we dive into this story of Jesus healing a man born blind, I think it's helpful to take a step back and see what's happened just prior to when this story unfolds.

Jesus is in the temple, foretelling his death and speaking about what true discipleship looks like. "I am the light of the world," he tells them. "Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

And the Jews are stabbing back at him with questions of belonging, authority, and legitimacy. "Aren't you a Samaritan? Don't you have a demon? Are YOU truly greater than our father Abraham?"

They are working every angle, trying their best to take him down, to invalidate his claims so they can validate their own hatred. And yet, Jesus counters their attacks with beauty, and imagery, and poetry. "Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I AM."

In response to the mystery he crafts before their very eyes, they clutch stones in their hands, and just as they are preparing to hurl their weapons, Jesus, like an escape artist, slips into one of the passageways in the temple, vanishes from sight, slides out the back door and is on his way.

[SLIDE]

Until, he spots a man. A beggar, really. A social outcast stripped of his heritage and home. A man born into blindness, forced to live a half-hearted life in the shadows.

By the way, how do they know this man is blind? Better yet, how do they know he is born this way? Does he wear some sort of ancient world handicapped uniform across his chest? Is he holding up a papyrus sign saying, “Born Blind. Please have mercy and spare 10 denarii?” Or is he so familiar as one of the town panhandlers that everyone who’s ever entered or exited the city has been interrupted by his pitiful pleas for money and mercy?

Seconds after Jesus spots him, his disciples are following his stride. They must’ve rendezvoused with him after Jesus’ escape trick in the temple, and now they’re back on their game, eager to theologize each and every one of Jesus’ actions.

“Whose sin caused this man to be born this way? His own sin, or the sin inherited from his parents?” I imagine them pointing their fingers, talking loudly enough for the man himself to hear them, as they transform the scene into some sort of object lesson seeking a quick and easy answer. They want definition, order, and logic to make sense of the chaos of the world.

But don’t we do this too? Don’t we, too, want to weave the chaos of our world into perfect little causation equations?

Why do bad things happen to good people? Everything happens for a reason.

Why did that little girl have to die so young? God needed another angel.

Why did I get this illness? God’s trying to teach me a lesson out of this.

Why do unjust political leaders rise to power? God is just reminding us that God is the only one who is all-powerful.

The temptation to package uncomfortable truths into tightly-laced God-logics is so seductive, isn't it? It makes the chaos, I think, feel more organized. Makes us feel like we're in control. Because being blind to the mystery of how, exactly, God works in the world is so unbearable when our blindness comes with such heavy costs.

But Jesus shuts down their theological blame game, and says, NO. This man nor his parents have caused his blindness. Instead, he is exactly the kind of person through whom God's works are made visible and known. This is exactly the kind of space through which God's light shines, even when you can only see darkness. Where you see only limitation and disability, God sees possibility for radical beauty and newness.

But, of course, Jesus continues on with more poetry: *"While it is daytime, we must do the works of the One who sent Me. But when the sun sets and night falls, this work is impossible. Whenever I am in the world, I am the Light of the world."*

[SLIDE]

And with that, Jesus spits on the ground, reaches into the mess and muck of the world and covers the man's eyes with even more darkness. And says, GO. Go to the pool of Siloam. Go to the place YOU are sent.

And he goes. He goes into the city center, into the public and pure pools in which he shouldn't belong, and he submerges into the living waters that require him to endure a short death of all his senses, even his very own breath.

[SLIDE]

And when he emerges from the waters, he is reborn—reborn from the muck of the earth, from the waters of baptism, from the words of the One who claimed and crafted him into a new creation.

We often call Jesus Rabbi, teacher, prophet and priest. And maybe I'm biased, but I like to think Jesus was an artist too. If we look at this story with an artist's eye, what can we learn? What does Jesus teach us about creativity in the chaos?

[SLIDE]

Well, first, I think we have to unpack what we have learned about creativity. Perhaps our lives follow somewhat of a similar narrative. When we are born, we are exponentially creative. We build things out of blocks and dirt and sand, and leggos. We play pretend, and paint, and color, and sing to our heart's content. WE are tiny little creatures, and yet we are bursting at the seams with creativity and imagination. We encounter the world with the eyes of an artist, seeing curiosity and possibility in all things. And we create not for any reason beyond the fact that it is in us—we can't NOT create.

Then, we get older, enter into grade school, and perhaps we start to internalize a particular message that WHAT we create is associated with some sort of value or judgment. We start to receive feedback. “Oh, so you’re not much of an artist. Stick to stick figures.” “Maybe singing isn’t your thing.” “Maybe next year you’ll get a part in the play.” “Your body just isn’t made for dance.”

OR, perhaps we are naturally gifted at something and we receive positive reinforcement and press onward in our craft. But we start to internalize that WHAT we create is either GOOD or BAD, and we’re only supposed to keep doing it if the world tells us we are GOOD at what we do creatively. So we start to weed out the creative efforts that are no good in our lives and only continue to try to perfect the skills for which we are praised.

And then, perhaps as we continue to get older and begin thinking more about our place in the world and how we will become productive citizens in society, we begin to think about our CREATIVITY in opposition with our PRODUCTIVITY. Creativity becomes this cute, fluffy, nonessential thing that gets set aside in our lives, reserved only for craft nights, or pinterest boards, or when we decide to make the time. We otherize our creativity within ourselves, pushing it to the sidelines of our identities in order to pursue the skills we think are productive and worthwhile.

And then some of us might say, “I don’t have a creative bone in my body.” “I’m not an artist.” And the child within us who was once bursting at the seams with imagination and creativity

But here's what I've learned about creativity: it is still within all of us, whether we recognize it or not, and it is intense and messy and demands your WHOLE heart and self. And, it teaches us about how to be reborn, over and over and over again.

Because I believe there are, essentially, 4 main stages of the creative process. But before I begin describing these stages, I want you to take a moment and think about one way you are creative in your life. This could be through painting, or writing, or cooking, gardening, crocheting, web design, or music...you might consider yourself super creative in how you work with people, or how you play on the soccer field. I want you to think of one way you act on your imagination to create something new in the world, and think about your creative process as I describe these 4 stages.

[SLIDE]

Stage 1: BIRTH. Your head swells with a vision (or maybe a hundred visions), energy builds, & you can't not create; SOMETHING is begging to burst forth from within you, begging you to say yes. OR, nothing is bursting forth from within you and it is LABOR to produce anything. Finally, inspiration sputters.

[SLIDE 6]

Stage 2: LIFE. Getting started is the hardest part, but you begin to create SOMETHING out of nothing, and it's everything you expected and nothing you expected at the same time. Bones begin to form flesh, rattle to life, and it is good. But with this forming life, you

become hyper aware that your control is slipping away—that the SOMETHING is a force to be reckoned with and you are no longer directing the ship, but simply sailing with the tides.

[SLIDE]

Stage 3: DEATH. Your initial visions aren't materializing, your head's a clouded mess, the materials are failing, the light's not right, the temperature is too hot and not hot enough. So you nap, and snack, and run, and take another nap. Inspiration has abandoned you, leaving SOMETHING to steer, and now you have crashed into an abyss of blah. You have officially created the worst SOMETHING ever. Shame and self-doubt cast the shadows in which you sulk.

[SLIDE]

Stage 4: RESURRECTION. Resiliency is just a pretty word for stubbornness because you persist, headstrong, through the tattered remnants of SOMETHING. Piece by piece, bit by bit, string by string, and stroke by stroke, you find yourself in the dust of the rising. It may not be up, but you are once again going somewhere, even if in circles. Everything is frenzy and hurry and chaos until, at once, you step back and SOMETHING says, "It is finished."

The creative process is a familiar story. Following in the footsteps of Christ is an art form.

[SLIDE]

So, back to our story of the blind man healed. What does Jesus as the artist teach us about creativity?

Well, perhaps we might observe Jesus embodying similar stages in this miracle story. First, he sees the man. The disciples immediately see him as a misfit puzzle piece and demand reasoning for his condition.

[SLIDE]

But Jesus sees him through the eyes of a Creative God, seeing him only as means for possibility and renewal. Perhaps while the disciples see him only as a flawed creation, Jesus sees him as the perfect opportunity to birth something new: new vision, new humanity, a new order.

Then, Jesus' art form begins to take LIFE.

[SLIDE]

He spits onto the ground, scooping up whatever materials are right before him, because the best artists know how to make do. And he pours his whole heart and body into the process, and it's messy and intimate and a little gross, honestly, as he paints his spit clay across the man's eyes. Once again embodying the divine Creator, Jesus recalls humanity's beginnings as he shapes the man anew from the clay of the earth.

[SLIDE]

But, his healing isn't immediate. The clay itself doesn't magically lead to healing. The creative process is rarely that easy or quick. Instead, he must GO. He must sacrifice public shaming and even more social scrutiny in order to go where he is sent and submerge himself to a quick death of his old life, to a death of his senses, to a death of what was once all too familiar and all too hard. A death to his own darkness.

[SLIDE]

And as he emerges, new air filling his lungs, the mud slipping from his eyes, he opens to a life made new, reborn into color and beauty, and light.

[SLIDE]

How might Jesus the artist dismantle the darkness within us? How can the creative process open us more freely to God's mystery so that we, too, might be reborn again and again?

I want to tell you a story about a woman named Gladys...

[GLADYS STORY]

Gladys had new eyes, but really, I was the one healed from my blindness. As she described her story to me, I couldn't help but try to rationalize it in my mind. I, like those disciples, was doing a bit of my own quick-fix theologizing, narrowing down God's mystery to some

sort of logical answer: the visions are a symptom of some sort of mental illness. There's no way she actually saw hebrew in the wrinkles, that's just a coincidence. Everyone can learn to draw—maybe she was just realizing the gift she'd always had?

But in that hour of sitting with her and watching her process over and over again, eventually something began to shift. As soon as I saw the outline of the Hibiscus flower, my blindness faded and something in me was reborn: Reborn in me was a respect for the mystery of God that warrants no easy answers or causation equations. Reborn in me was the conviction that God is truly about the work of possibility and renewal in all the cracked spaces of the world, even in me.

So, if you have been shaping a piece of clay, I invite you to hold it now in your hands. Look at what you have created. Perhaps it continues to be an unidentifiable lump that you have shaped and reshaped until it has cracked dry. Or perhaps you have created it into something resembling what you have heard or seen in this story. Regardless, you have created something out of nothing and the creativity instilled in you at birth has been reborn once again.

May we all have the courage to follow in the footsteps of our artist savior, sharing our creativity with the world so that we might all truly be healed from our own blindness to look upon the world with new eyes.

Please join me in prayer, as I offer a blessing by Jan Richardson.

Blessing of Mud

Lest we think
the blessing
is not

in the dirt.
Lest we think
the blessing
is not
in the earth
beneath our feet.
Lest we think
the blessing
is not
in the dust,
like the dust
that God scooped up
at the beginning
and formed
with God's
two hands
and breathed into
with God's own
breath.
Lest we think
the blessing
is not
in the spit.
Lest we think
the blessing
is not
in the mud.
Lest we think
the blessing
is not
in the mire,
the grime,
the muck.
Lest we think
God cannot reach
deep into the things
of earth,
cannot bring forth
the blessing
that shimmers
within the sludge,
cannot anoint us
with a tender
and grimy grace.
May we be proven wrong—over and over again. Amen.

Friends, the beauty of the story in John 9 is that Jesus doesn't heal alone. He chooses the blind man to co-create with him, to be an active participant in his own renewal process.

And so, today, God chooses us too. So, let us GO. Let us GO to our Siloam, the places we are sent, even with mud on our eyes, even in our blindness, even if it feels unnatural or chaotic to do so. And once we are there, may we allow ourselves to die and rise again to the newness that our Creator God is birthing in and through us all.

And may God bless us and keep us.

May God's face shine down upon us.

May God be gracious, and give us peace,

Forever and ever, Amen.