



Series 1: Jesus, disability and discrimination

3 Healing the Blind Man

By Craig Millward

'Shame', Brene Brown reminds us, 'is real pain'. She points to a recent study which reveals that 'as far as the brain is concerned, physical pain and intense experiences of social rejection hurt in the same way... Shame is particularly hard because it hates having words wrapped around it. It hates being spoken', and thus remains hidden where it lurks as a constant source of humiliation and embarrassment. (Brene Brown – *Daring Greatly* (London: Portfolio Penguin, 2012), 71)

In Jesus' day and today, beggars would make a living by using the one currency they possessed: the ability to manufacture feelings of remorse, thus reinforcing the reality of their own social isolation. Emotions of passers-by are engaged simply because they are stored in the subconscious memory along with our patterns of what is 'normal'. People can't avoid noticing a disabled person in the street and therefore can't do a great deal to influence their initial reaction which will invariably be accompanied by a feeling. They do, however, have a choice to make about what their actions are going to be. Most avoid the choice altogether out of fear or indecision. I'd like to think the disciples threw a few coins as they turned their discomfort into a theological question. Jesus acted, and every detail of his response is significant.

There are thirty nine things that cannot be done on the Sabbath according to the Mishnah. In this story it is probable that, even before he healed the man, Jesus broke two laws contained in the oral Torah: building (mixing clay which is counted as a building material) and kneading/mixing (adding water was permissible but not mixing it in). He then put the mud on the man's eyes which, if it was done with the intention of healing, broke a further law. Although Jesus didn't consider himself bound by oral Torah, neither was he an intentional law-breaker. He could have simply touched the man and restored his sight but chooses to make himself more culpable in the eyes of his critics by involving spit and mud. Why are the details important and what do they signify?

I suggest Jesus has at least three things in mind. John tells how Jesus chooses to create a scenario whereby the man is forced to wash himself in order that he may test his eyesight. In doing this, Jesus was giving the man a part to play in his own healing, thus dignifying him. By sending him away he was also presenting the man with an opportunity to receive without feeling the obligation to honour his healer to the hilt. Jesus clearly desired to heal the person in addition to restoring his sight. Finally, in sending the man away and melting into the background as he went, Jesus was protecting the man from the religious authorities who had already made up their minds against him and would therefore persecute the previously blind man once they found out he had encountered the troublemaker they were determined to kill. The religion of Jesus'

day seemed to have no discernible mission beyond protecting itself from difficult questions and preserving the status quo.

Discussion Questions

- In what ways do you identify with Brene Brown's observations about shame?
- Should we distinguish between healing the body and healing the person?
- Which is more important and why?