

## **John 9: 1-41**

### ***Blind as a Pretzel***

**A sermon preached by**  
James F. McIntire

**Text:**  
John 9:1-41

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### **Hope United Methodist Church**

Eagle & Steel Roads, Havertown, PA

Phone: 610-446-3351

Web: [www.HavHopeUMC.org](http://www.HavHopeUMC.org)

Office: [HopeUMCHavertown@verizon.net](mailto:HopeUMCHavertown@verizon.net)

Pastor: [HopeUMCPastor@verizon.net](mailto:HopeUMCPastor@verizon.net)

1 As he walked along, [Jesus] saw a man blind from birth. 2 His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" 3 Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. 4 We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. 5 As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." 6 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, 7 saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see.

8 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?" 9 Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him." He kept saying, "I am the man." 10 But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" 11 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." 12 They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know."

13 They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. 14 Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. 15 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." 16 Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath." But others said, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" And they were divided. 17 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." 18 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 19 and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" 20 His parents answered, "We know that this is

our son, and that he was born blind; 21 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." 22 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. 23 Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him." 24 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." 25 He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." 26 They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" 27 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?" 28 Then they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. 29 We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from." 30 The man answered, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. 31 We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. 32 Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. 33 If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." 34 They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" And they drove him out.

35 Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" 36 He answered, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him." 37 Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." 38 He said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped him.

39 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." 40 Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, "Surely we are not blind, are we?" 41 Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains.

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“Both of their figures are discerned in billboards, refrigerator rust stains, strangely shaped vegetables,” said Roman Catholic priest Francis Caponi as he drew parallels between Elvis Presley and Jesus (1994).

I checked for the latest on line last night and came up with a list of items available at the end of 2008.

- For sale. Image of Jesus on cooked chicken. Starting bid \$199.00 Buy it Now \$20,000.00. Seller claims the waitress was amazed. Will ship in dry ice.
- For sale. Image of Jesus on shower curtain. Starting bid \$1000.00 Seller claims very rare. Does not indicate where shower curtain was purchased. Also suggests that buyer may separate into individual images as it repeats every ten inches or so.
- For Sale. Image of Jesus on Lay's Sour Cream & Onion Potato Chip Starting Bid \$1.00 Seller claims his daughter found the ultra rare chip in a bag purchased at local supermarket.
- Image of Jesus on Tortilla Starting Bid \$7.00 Seller indicates that portions of the sale will go to Children's Miracle Network.
- For Sale. Image of Jesus on Tree Root Starting Bid \$500.00 Seller claims that this image will be included in upcoming book, "Images Of Jesus In Common Life."
- Image of Jesus on found piece of wood. Starting Bid \$100.00 Buy it now \$2000.00 Seller claims to have found this at his work. (If the date is correct then this was a miracle. ) Hopes buyer will take good care of it.
- For Sale. Image of Jesus found on soap after washing face night before Easter Starting Bid \$.99 Seller claims "I WASHED MY FACE ON THE NIGHT BEFORE EASTER AND WHEN I AWOKE THIS IMAGE WAS

ON THE BAR OF SOAP" Seller has a 99.4% positive feedback and a rather large Ebay store.

- For Sale. Image of Jesus on Marble Tile Starting Bid \$25,000.00 seller claims quite a lot. "What you see is a photo of a miraculous image of Jesus Christ as His image appears on a marble tile mounted on a wall. Above his head appears a brilliant white light. It also appears to me that He is covered by His shroud. Even more amazing is that this tile is oriented so that He is facing East, exactly in the direction toward the sunrise. As you can see, there is a remarkable resemblance of the image on this tile to a picture of Jesus we all recognize from our childhood Bible study classes."
- For Sale Image Of Jesus Starting Bid \$100.00. Seller claims firewood was glowing special image. "On the night of President Elect Obama's election, I was sitting by the fireplace in the Bible Belt of North Carolina reading my Bible when I noticed this one piece of fire wood was glowing with a special image, I pushed it back in the flames and the wood still would not burn with the rest. The next morning, I started to clean the fireplace remnants and LO and Behold, that same piece of wood was still intact with the image of Jesus burned into it. I believe this is a sign that things will get better in this world. God Bless Us All!"

Or, in case none of those work for you, I just found on-line, dated March 8, a grape that looks like the Virgin Mary.

<http://godhatesfraggles.net/2009/03/08/the-grapes-of-mary/>



But my absolute favorite was back in 2005. "Virgin Mary Holding Baby Jesus Pretzel." Is this what we've come to? Is this what the faithful followers of a 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish sage have finally settled on? It's the eBay title for this case of spiritual phenomena in the world of popular piety. "Virgin Mary Holding Baby Jesus Pretzel."

The Pretzel. It seems that 12-year-old Nebraskan Crysta Naylor, and her mom Machel, were munching through a bag of Rold Gold Honey Mustard Pretzels one weekend a couple of years ago and almost bit the head off the Virgin Mary and her tiny Son. Close call! "We both kind of looked at each other at the time [Crysta] brought it out," said mom in an interview with MSNBC, "and she turned it around and when she turned it around I said, 'that looks like the Virgin Mary holding baby Jesus' and she said, 'that's what I think, Mom.' Machel and Crysta "researched the Bible after finding the salty Madonna and Child and discovered 'mustard seeds, honey and even pretzels are mentioned in the texts'."



They put their pretzel for sale on eBay's auction Website. This is the line that really touched my heart: "Crysta is hoping the bids will reach \$1,000 so she can buy a horse."

Here's the full eBay description:

MOTHER AND CHILD...This totally unique and spiritual item was found by a 12 year old girl. She was eating "Rold Gold" Honey Mustard flavored tiny twist pretzels, when she noticed the Virgin Mother holding Baby Jesus. We all had a feeling of warmth and spirituality when holding the pretzel. The bible references the parables of the mustard seed (**Matthew 13:31-32; Mark 4:30-32**), honey is sweet to the soul & healing of the bones (**Proverbs 16:24**) and the pretzel (**John 3:14-21**) has a deep spiritual meaning for LENT. We believe the Lord works his magic and this is evident in this item! Pretzel 1 inch wide by 2 inches tall.

It even comes with a special Pretzel Prayer:

Bless this special Lenten bread, O God. May its folded arms remind us of your love which folds around us. Let this little bread help us to especially remember your son, Jesus, during Lent. Guide us, O God, into his loving ways each day. Amen.

Within the first week of posting, bids rose to \$1,050. I guess the little girl could use the prophetic pretzel's profit to purchase the perfect pony. Eventually, the prized piece of baked bread sold for \$10,600 to the same online casino that earlier had bought a grilled cheese with the image of Jesus on it!

Early on one curious Web surfer wrote to the sellers: "Is this pretzel best eaten with Holy water or wine? Good Luck and I hope you make it to a thousand bucks!"



Machelle, the mom, wrote back:

This has become much of a surprise to us! We put the reserve price high because we didn't think we could sell a pretzel for \$1000. My daughter is only 12 and when the question was asked what do you want to do with the money - she thought of her wish for so many years of having a horse. We though ... have discussed this as a family (there is only 3 of us) and decided the best thing is to support our local church, also a church we were at for 9 years before and we will seek guidance from our local pastor for other charities. This has been quite a learning experience. It started out on a Sunday...a mother and daughter researching scripture and enjoying our afternoon together. Then the decision of sharing with everyone was answered by displaying on eBay. Whether this was a good decision will be given on Wednesday. I do want my daughter to have her dream of owning a horse, but the Lord does work his magic and [is] guiding us in a different path. [sic]

Okay, so no horse for the little girl. Sorry, Crysta.

But I ask again. Is this what we've come to? Do we really believe that God "works his magic" and we get what we want? That's the line in this whole story that bothers me the most. "The Lord works his magic." God the Magician – an interesting twist (again, no pretzel pun intended) on our belief system. Perhaps if we set up this Madonna and Child pretzel on a pedestal and bow down before it – you can get it on a mug already – we'll all be inspired by God's magic tricks performed before our eyes.

Maybe it's what those who challenged Jesus were hoping for, a little magic. Magic would explain all the fuss about him. If he was performing magic tricks then they could explain away what was happening. But they can't get anyone to confess Jesus the Magician. "I don't know how he did it," said the man who had been born blind, "[But] one thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see."

Jesus was walking through John's Gospel, minding his own – and God's – business when he came across an unnamed man. His disciples assumed that because the man did not have his visual sense intact he must be a sinner – or at least his parents must have been. "No, no, no," says Jesus to his once-again-confused talmidim (Hbrw: group of disciples/students), "one's disability has nothing to do with sin."

Note there's no pity in this story. Jesus' response is not, "Oh, poor little blind man. Let me take away your affliction. Let me make you whole again." Jesus doesn't even notice the man's blindness – he sees the man. The man doesn't ask to have his blindness taken

away – he's fine with it. The encounter is very simply about us experiencing God's revealed awesomeness. If it takes bringing a man's visual sense back to life, then that's what Jesus is willing to do to get the message across.

So who's blind in this story?

The disciples are blind. Their ignorance is clear. They talk right past this man, as if he wasn't standing there, and talk to Jesus. It's no different today – it's common for people to talk to the attendant or the companion of a person with a disability instead of directly to the person. I've often been with a friend who uses a wheelchair when a condescending waiter asks, "And what will she be having for dinner this evening?" "I don't know. You'll have to ask her."

The world is blind. This man is a beggar. He has been forced to the lowest rung of the ladder because society thinks he has nothing to offer. After he can see, "The neighbors and those who had seen him before as [merely] a beggar were saying, 'Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?'" That's the only way they knew him. He's blind, he begs. There's no other place for him in our world. He has to assume the role we've created for him. They can see him in that role; they can't, or they refuse, to see him in any other. "It is he," said some. "Naw, can't be," said others. "I am the man," he said. "Then how were your eyes opened?," the blind skeptics insisted.

The accusers are blind. The teachers knew the law; the teachers knew the rules; the teachers knew their limited God would not allow healing on the Sabbath. They knew. They're blind. Standing in front of them is a person who can ably witness to Jesus' godliness and they can't see it. "Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing."

They've already decided that they're not going to listen. "You're blind, you're a sinner, what do you know?" "But I can see!"

“You’re blind, you’re a sinner ...” “But I can see!” “You’re blind, you’re a sinner ...” “But I ...” “You’re blind ...” “But ...” “You’re blind ...” Period. End of debate. Our eyes are closed.

Who is blind in this story? Those who are questioning God’s revelation. Those who choose to look past this man and only at his inability. Those who doubt the man, doubt Jesus, doubt God. Those who refuse to see anything positive about this man or his story. Those who choose to treat him as if all he is is what they say he is. Those who insist that God be kept in the box.

Maybe we’re the blind ones in the Jesus story. Maybe we fail to see how God can work through something which we consider imperfect. The world considers the man in the story imperfect, incomplete, not normal, dis-abled. But Jesus doesn’t. Without this man God would not have had the chance to be revealed to those who witnessed and believed. God acts not through our perfection but through our imperfectness. The opposite would be disastrous for us. Imagine – if God was revealed only through that in this world which is perfect, God would never be revealed! Nothing about any of us is perfect.

Back to the Jesus pretzel, if you will, lest we miss the point. The miracle in that story was not in the chance twisting of a piece of dough. The miracle was not in the escape of Madonna and Child from the jaws of a hungry, 12-year-old, Nebraskan. The revelation of God was not in the amount of money some church got as a result of eBay’s marketing techniques. The miracle was not in the fact that some kind soul probably bought that little girl her long-wished-for horse.

The miracle of the “Virgin Mary Holding Baby Jesus Pretzel” is in this single line from the story – and we almost miss it. “It started out on a Sunday...a mother and daughter researching scripture and enjoying our afternoon together.”

Just as in John’s Gospel the story appears to be about some beyond-the-ordinary miracle performed by one whom some would call a Magical Jesus, so also the Nebraskan sacred pretzel story appears to be about the magical appearance of a sacred idol. Yet the Gospel story is about so much more. It starts with a question – “Who sinned, this man or his parents” – and it ends after 41 verses of conversation witnessing to God’s presence. This is a long story for such a clear cut healing. Anywhere else in scripture a Jesus healing gets a few verses – not 41. So what looks like a miracle healing on the surface, is actually the gate into a deeper understanding of God among us. That’s the true miracle here. We read the question – “Who sinned?” – and we spend the next few moments or longer thinking, wondering, asking, searching.

So perhaps that’s what the Jesus pretzel does for us as well. We hear the question. Could this pretzel be Jesus? And we spend the rest of the afternoon with a little a 12-year-old girl poring over the sacred texts, thinking, wondering, asking, searching. And that’s not such a bad thing after all.

Here we are today once again gathered in worship of this very same God. We pray for God to be known to us in whatever ways are possible. We don’t pray the Pretzel Prayer – “Bless this special Lenten bread, O God. May its folded arms remind us of your love which folds around us.” But we do pray that God be revealed to us in our gathering which for us is the bread of life, bringing to us the nourishing of our spirits – in our worship we find the bread of revelation. We pray not for an act of magic, but for an act of mercy, that God will be gracious to us and be revealed to us despite our blindness.

Our prayer today and every day – may God open our eyes and our hearts as we attempt to open ourselves to each other.

Amen.