

## “Mud Moments” – sermons by Madeline Heymann, Boyd Pugh, and Sophie Frankowski

### Madeline

When I knocked on the door for another night of babysitting at my neighbor’s house, I was greeted by a new face. The man walked me into the house while he explained he was a family friend of the parents. The man was quick to start a conversation and continued it for about 20 minutes until the parents were finally ready for their night. As I walked them out of the house, I heard the man say “It was nice meeting you. Have a good life!”

I could not stop thinking about how weird of a thing that was to say. It did not seem out of character, but it did seem out of context. “Have a good life!” as if there was a certainty that we were only in each other’s lives for this moment... It seemed obscure, caught me totally off guard. But, as I mulled it over, it seemed quite likely that I WOULD never see him again. As I remembered from our conversation, this man was from out of town, so there were truly no reasons for us to cross paths again.

In the back of my head, I had always known that people might only come into our lives for a single moment, but this moment left me with a sense of urgency that I had never considered. In fact, on the night of my babysitting, it caused a sudden panic in my mind, as I continued to look over the kids and counted down until bedtime. That evening, I began to go back in my mind and recall all the other people I have interacted with that I might also never get the chance to see again: my friend Ailis I met one summer at sleepaway camp, the elderly woman that smiled at me from her porch when I was walking my dog (Teddy), my classmate Ramona that moved across the country in elementary school, etc. How can one know when a goodbye is for good? After I set the kids asleep and had time alone to ponder, I concluded that one will never know. The unfortunate truth is that there is never a promise of seeing someone again.

But this event certainly did one thing for me: it made me re-think my priorities in life. Hebrews 13:2 states “Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing so some people have entertained angels without knowing it.” How often have I put superficial things above relationships in my life? In the

business of life, it always seems like there is another thing to worry about - schoolwork, social status, appearance, college search, how much sleep I'm getting. But maybe the most important thing is the PEOPLE God is putting in my life on my journey through time. What would my life look like if opened my eyes to the angels disguised as ordinary people and allowed myself to CLOSE my eyes to the things our society suggests we always must be in a hurry to achieve.

This idea of urgency and the crucialness of managing priorities is present throughout the story of a blind man we read today. The Pharisees encounter the blindman but fail to encounter GOD in the blindman. To them, he is certainly not an angel in disguise; they are convinced the blind man is a sinner and represents a threat to their way of seeing the world. Undergirding this belief is their warped view that holiness is about appearance and cleanliness rather than about what's in a person's heart. Focusing on their interpretation of law above all things has distracted them from relationships elsewhere in the Gospels. This misplaced prioritization of law over love through their treatment of the blindman presents itself through the story. They cannot see the blindman as anything other than the sinner, nor can they see the value in Jesus because he is technically breaking the law by healing on the Sabbath. Because of their stubbornness and offset priorities, the Pharisees are missing out not only on a relationship with the blindman who proves himself to have a strong faith; they are also missing out on the value that the great healer, prophet, and ultimately Savior will bring to their lives. While they accuse the blindman of being a sinner, it is they who are truly blind. And it is they who would benefit from the power of fresh eyes.

In a way, I feel like I relate to the Pharisees. When I met this man while babysitting, I found that I showed a good version of myself; however, there are so many other relationships in my life where this was not the case. In past moments I have been so focused on superficial issues that I forgot that kindness and love to others is what this life is all about. For instance, growing up I would always hope to the future and think of how my life would "better" if I focused on my appearance. I would say to myself, "I'll be so much happier when my skin clears up, when my hair grows longer, when I get my braces off, when I get cuter clothes," or whatever other superficial traits I thought were important. Ironically, as a graduating senior, I feel as though I have become the girl middle school me thought she aspired to be.

However, I have noticed there is more I yearn for. If I want to live “like a child of the light” like our Ephesians text urgently calls for, maybe I need to re-think what the source of flourishing really is. I thank God for my own “mud moment,” just as Jesus helped the blindman to see, this interaction at my neighbor’s that had me see the world again anew. As angels are all around us, I pray that I can focus more on being present in relationships, my relationship with others and my relationship with God, and not be blinded by the twisted demands this world puts on me.

## Boyd

“He was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.” This is how Jesus answered his disciples when they first encountered the blind man in today’s Gospel. This sounds like a fairly pedestrian thing Jesus would say; I didn’t give it a second thought when I first read it. But this sentence is actually incredibly powerful for listeners both then and now, as it shows that our first impressions of people may be a lot more limiting than we realize. Back in the time before our beloved allergy meds and soap, illness, disease, and injury were all thought to be signs of someone or their family having sinned. Blind people were quickly tossed aside as unclean outcasts who threatened the holy order of Jewish life... Jesus saw differently. Whether or not he knew about the power of antibiotics to come, he certainly knew that the way humans saw weakness came from fear, and not truth. Jesus saw humanity in this blind man, and instead of tossing him aside like everyone else, he gave the blind man a chance and chose love. In this story, Jesus invites the blind man to rub mud on his eyes and wash them, and in doing so, find healing in faith. As I read the Scripture, I was struck that once included and redeemed, this ostracized blind man actually turned out to have some gifted insights. He was even able to give the Pharisees, the religious leaders, a bit of a lesson: that Jesus must be from God and free of sin to accomplish the miraculous act he did. It makes me wonder in my own life what wisdom I miss out on when I limit and judge others.

In fact, this story reminded me of a young man in my own life who the world, and myself, too often has seen as a limitation rather than a blessing. This good friend, who I’ll call J, has been a “weird guy” since I’ve known him. You can imagine the type: someone who doesn’t really conform. He socializes differently, he hates sports unlike other boys his age, and has numerous habits that make other people think he is strange. He is not someone who usually gets much appreciation from the world. Nor from me, for the longest time. I was, frankly, a bit of a bully for most of the time that I’ve known him. I’ve made fun of him way too much, dismissing his quirks as things to be lampooned. I’ve hurt him many times thinking I was pushing him to be “normal.” As I’ve grown, I’ve learned to appreciate the diversity of talents and personalities we all have; while I fit more into the stereotypical box of what this world celebrates (I am an athlete and someone who does well in school and social settings for instance), I now know there is no such thing as normal. In thinking this, I was actually filled with ego and spiritual blindness, just like the Pharisees in this story. This changed when I had my own “mud moment,” an instance in which God opened MY eyes to a whole new way of seeing the world for the better. It was simple and yet profound at the same time. You see, I had made fun of J for a long time for his messy eating. He would always be covered in the food he’d eat, almost to the point of it being a circus if you watched him. But one day, I was tearing into a box of pizza when J came upon me to find ME absolutely COVERED in pizza sauce next to an empty box of pizza. It wasn’t a good look for me. But it showed me I should be hesitant to judge others by superficial standards, because if I did, I’d miss the mark sometimes too. How is this not like the Pharisees judging the blind man by their flawed standards, and in doing so, ending up with egg on their face by missing Jesus’ main message.

While J still is quirky, God has given me fresh eyes to see how he is far more of a gift than a burden. The flipside of J’s abnormalities is that he is actually an unending source of energy and joy that can’t be beat and is a great artist to boot. I can’t believe today that I would pass up on someone like this with so many great qualities. But just like the Pharisees, I was caught up on how mainstream society judges humans and not what Jesus would choose: unconditional grace and acceptance. This story has driven me to choose love more often and not pass judgment on others too quickly. “He was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.” The more I think about this quote, the more it reminds me of J. If nothing else, I now know one thing: if I give people a shot, sometimes I hit a bullseye.

## Sophie

In this gospel, the concept of blindness plays a central role. But who is truly blind in this story? Is blindness good or bad? Ultimately, the passage seems to suggest that what we choose to be blind *to* makes all the difference. In Matthew 23:25-26, Jesus says, "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within they are full of extortion and excess." The Pharisees are compared to a cup that is clean on the outside but dirty on the inside, and throughout Jesus' ministry, he condemns them for the ways they *appear* to live righteously... betraying the closed-mindedness and pride that actually have clouded their hearts. It is no different in this story, in which the Pharisees are highlighted as the true sinners for their judgmental behavior and lack of humility. This is evidenced immediately when the Pharisees see the blind man on the street and instinctively write him off as a sinner from his appearance, without any knowledge of his life. They accuse him of being unholy because they've focused entirely on the strict norms they tie to righteousness, preventing them from appreciating the miracle of compassion bestowed upon the blind man. By judging the man and not showing awareness for the lack of love in their own souls, they are *spiritually* blind.

While the Pharisees' blindspot was religious law, I wonder whether we all have our own blindspots that keep us from appreciating the fullness of life. I'd like to walk you through a typical day in my life. I wake up, scroll on my phone before getting ready for school, and then leave. Then I go to school for 8 hours, but most of the time I'm doing work on my computer or doing crossword puzzles. After I get home things go pretty quickly. I do my homework, eat dinner, watch a show, and watch tik tok. Suddenly it's 11:30 at night and I can't seem to put my phone down. When I finally do, I look up at the ceiling and wonder where my entire day went. I breathed, I worked, and I did everything I was supposed to. But looking up at that ceiling, I felt as if I was just seeing the world for the first time that day. Without knowing, I had been unconscious to greater love the whole day. This is my blind spot. I spend so much time going through the motions and in the bubble of social media that I barely *see* the world anymore - a world full of joy, laughter, nature, inspiration, human connection, and divine moments.

While my biggest distraction from love may be letting busy-ness consume me, I invite you to think of your own. Might *perfectionism* be keeping you from knowing the power of self-love and appreciating your limits? Might being *over-competitive* cause you to steamroll others to get what you want?

Might focusing on appearances or belongings make you feel hollow on the inside? The list goes on and on. I wonder if Jesus invites us in our gospel to ourselves become blind to the traps that this world sets for us. 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." We think of Jesus only helping the blind man in this story, but maybe Jesus is here for all of us, trying to blind us regular people - in a beautiful way - to the things preventing us from seeing our most authentic existence. Our sermon group liked to call these divine awakenings "mud moments," and mine was definitely realizing how I need to slow down and reflect more in life.

There is one more part to this story, though. Not only do we have to check our own blind spots, but also maybe we should make sure we aren't limiting people based on our own definitions of blindness. Perhaps the people we define as "blind" may have gifts we need to appreciate before we ostracize them. Maybe the blind man written off by the Pharisees saw the world around him in a much truer light than the religious leaders. Maybe he didn't have as many distractions. He certainly seemed to appreciate Jesus in a way none of the Pharisees could. And maybe this is a lesson for today. That things that we think of as being limitations like being selfless, or humble, are actually things that can bring us closer to God.

You may have heard of one of my favorite movies, Encanto. Encanto follows a family blessed with magical powers. All the Madrigal children have powers, that is, except Mirabel, the first of her family to not receive a gift after coming of age. In the movie, their house starts breaking apart and her siblings start losing their powers. However, Mirabel's not having a gift ends up being one of her greatest strengths, as she is able to see past the family's barriers and perceive the root cause of the problem. She works to bring her family back together and ultimately save them from destruction. Being "blind" or ungifted by the Madrigal family's standards is what helped Mirabel see past all other distractions.

Ultimately, then, the passage seems to suggest that what we choose to be blind *to* makes all the difference. Being blind to love will cause us to suffer, whether we realize it or not. We might become hardened to gifts around us and people that could benefit us in this world. On the other hand, becoming blind to secular distractions could allow God to guide us towards deeper love. Maybe then, we could have fresh eyes to encounter freedom at its fullness.