

# **“The Pharisee Medical Insurance Company”**

## **Lent 4 Sermon, Year A 3/19/2023**

Readings: 1 Samuel 16:1-13, Psalm 23, Ephesians 5:8-14, John 9:1-41

May God be with us.

Hello! My name is Chris Johnson. I’m a parishioner at Saint Anne’s Episcopal Church in the city of Sunfish Lake, which is a small suburb sandwiched between Mendota Heights and West Saint Paul. I’m currently in my second year of the Lay Preacher Training Initiative, a pilot program that’s being run in six dioceses across the country to train lay persons, such as myself, in the art of writing and delivering sermons. One of the reasons why this program exists is to offer points of view from the pulpit from those of us who aren’t ordained and thus have different experiences to provide.

For example, in my day job, I review medical insurance claims to ensure that doctors get accurate payment for what they did. Sounds thrilling, eh? But, when I was offered the opportunity to preach for this series, and looked over the available readings, I immediately knew that I’d be able to provide a very specific perspective on this week’s Gospel reading that would likely be quite different from what most clergy would be able to offer.

And I kinda hate to say it, but think I’d have to wind up siding with the Pharisees if this claim from Doctor Jesus ever came across my desk.

In today’s reading from the Gospel of John, we hear the story of Jesus healing a man who was “blind from birth.” This was the sixth of seven major miracles Jesus performed that are attested to in the first half of John’s Gospel. The first was turning water into wine at the wedding at Cana; second, Jesus healed a royal official’s son at Capernaum; third was the healing the paralytic at the pool at Bethesda; fourth, the feeding the 5000 (the only one that’s in all four Gospels), and number five was when he walked on water on the lake as they went back to Capernaum afterwards. Number seven? We’ll hear about that one next week.

At any rate, for this sixth miracle, Jesus granted the blind man sight by “[spitting] on the ground and [making] mud with the saliva and [spreading] the mud on the man’s eyes.” Then, all the man had to do was to “wash in the pool of Siloam” and he’d be able to see.

Now, when a doctor performs a procedure like this, they’ll convert everything to a set of codes for the medical insurance claim that describes what the diagnosis was and what they did. Please pardon the pro-speak while I get technical here, because I’m going to try and build an insurance claim based on these nearly 2,000-year-old doctor’s notes! Well, OK, John’s Gospel doesn’t go quite into the right amount of specificity for me to definitively assign a proper diagnosis using the current ICD-10-CM codes, but I’m reasonably certain that diagnosis code H44.0X55 applies—that’s the code for complete blindness in both eyes—but the instructions for using it say you first need to code the underlying condition that caused the blindness, and since John doesn’t tell us that, we’ll have to use our imagination a bit. Considering the treatment, I’m going to go with Q13.3, Congenital corneal opacity. We’ll say his corneas aren’t letting light through.

We also need to code for the treatment offered, and unsurprisingly, the Current Procedural Terminology codes published by the American Medical Association do not seem to have one that involves spitting on the ground, making mud, and rubbing it on the patient's eyes.

And of course, it's the Pharisees who jump at the chance to be the insurance auditors here, questioning every aspect of the service.

*OK, look, code 65436 may be an appropriate treatment for this patient's cornea problem, but your surgical notes state that you used mud rather than ethylene-diamine-tetra-acetic acid, so I'm going to have to deny this claim as not conforming to the correct standards of treatment. What school of ophthalmology did you say you went to again?*

OK, but here's the thing that people often get wrong about the Pharisees. If you were to ask a random first-century Jew their opinion of the Pharisees, you might be surprised at just how popular of a sect they were at the time! As for WHY, there's this wonderful book by A. J. Jacobs called *The Year of Living Biblically: One Man's Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible* which chronicles his attempts to follow...religiously...the entire Law of Moses. All of it. No pork, no shellfish. No shaving. No cotton/polyester blends. Contact a Rabbi if you get mildew in your basement. His good-natured struggles lead to the inescapable conclusion that it's really, really hard to do this.

The Pharisees' whole reason for existence was to develop tricks to make day-to-day living compatible with both Jewish and Roman law. If the technology had been around at the time, they'd have published BuzzFeed lists with titles like "Here's 11 Ways to Keep the Sabbath Without Making the Centurions Mad!" And the people appreciated them for it!

Where the Pharisees failed, of course, was in elevating their explanation of the *letter* of the Law over the obvious *Spirit* of the Law. Every single one of Jesus's conflicts with the Pharisees can be boiled down to them saying, "these are the rules," and Jesus saying "hey, but if those rules lead to us not loving one another as our Father in Heaven loves us, they aren't worth following."

So, in this story, let's think of the Pharisees not as nasty, overly religious bullies, but as bureaucratic insurance auditors.

*Um, it says here this blindness was congenital and due to corneal opacity, and code 65436 is not an approved treatment for that diagnosis. We would allow for code 65420 or 65426 as a treatment but there's no way he could've gone from level 5 blindness all the way down to simple nearsightedness in a matter of minutes. We have standards of care for a reason, and I'm going to have to recommend the medical board review your licensure.*

But though my job involves reviewing claims from doctors, it's important to remember that often it's the patient who gets stuck in the middle, and that definitely happens to this guy. The auditors...I mean Pharisees...interrogate him, demanding to know who treated him, what his credentials were and what exactly he'd done. They could tell that he wasn't blind afterward, but rather than accept that the treatment worked, some of them tried to argue that the initial diagnosis must not have been correct, because they couldn't accept that an unlicensed faith healer had managed to do what essentially comes down to a drive-thru cornea treatment, and on the SABBATH at that!

They even dragged the poor guy's parents in to confirm the diagnosis. And clearly, none of them were thrilled to be grilled by the closed-minded Pharisees.

And as often happens in medical bureaucracy, there are no clear winners in this story. The man gets his sight...but gets driven out from the community. As a blind man, he wouldn't have been able to earn a living, and was likely either a beggar or being supported by his parents. Now, he's got to find his own way in life, and as someone who's lived to adulthood without learning a trade but now also without a disability that could earn him alms, what's he to do? Go around asking for "alms for an ex-blind man?"

Jesus completely changed this man's life! His whole persona, at least from what we hear in this Gospel, was being "a man blind from birth," and that's not who he is any longer. Really, if you think about it, Jesus used him. He tells his disciples that "he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him." The Gospel does NOT say anything about Jesus asking the man to consent to the procedure. No signing of an authorization for treatment or anything. He just said, "I'm gonna use you as an example of the works of God" and within moments he's rubbing freshly made mud on his eyes.

I also want to emphasize one other nugget in this story. What's the very first thing that's said about the blind man? It's Jesus's disciples making the automatic assumption that, well, he's blind, so SOMEONE must've sinned. Bad things always happen for a reason, right? And after he's been healed, that's the exact same assumption the Pharisees made—they said to him, "You were born entirely in sins!" This is clearly a common world view for this society, and I have to assume that the blind man also believed that sin (whether his or his parents') was the reason for his status in life.

Now, where have I heard that argument before...oh, right, in the book of Job, which inexplicably was not the Old Testament reading for today. In that book, great misfortunes befall Job, and his friends try ("try" being the operative word here) to help him by prodding Job's memory about where and when he must've sinned to cause these things to happen, but Job can't for the life of him understand it. The reasoning there is the same as here. Job's misfortunes were not, in fact, a result of any sin. And neither was this man's blindness. When asked whether it was the man's own or his parents' fault for the blindness, Jesus says NEITHER.

Talk about completely changing someone's life...Jesus refuses to ascribe any morality (or lack thereof) to the blindness. It's not his fault. It's not his parents' fault. The Pharisees may have driven him out of their society, but Jesus, by defying the societal norm that disability = sin, was explicitly creating a new society here. And, as Jesus explicitly says, it's only those who are given the opportunity to see but still refuse who wind up stuck in sin.

Not only did Jesus deny the assumption that the man was sinful, in the coda of this story, having heard that the man had been driven out, Jesus went and found him and offered him the chance to become his disciple, gave him a new community, a new life.

A medical intervention can be a life-changing experience. In my job, I have a small, very specific window into that process. There are times when I look at my work and worry that I'm too much like the Pharisees, because what I do comes down to raising questions about whether what's on the claim was appropriate and accurate, just as the Pharisees did with this man's treatment.

But even though the point of my work is about the finances, the numbers, the codes, I still know that each of those values on a spreadsheet corresponds with a human life.

I have the privilege to be able to read and understand these codes, and to know that I'm actually seeing thousands of medical miracles every day. Things that in Jesus's time could only have been healed supernaturally are now treated so quickly and professionally that it's easy to forget the wonders of modern medicine, as providers "work the works" to serve their patients. It's an incredible blessing to be, even tangentially, a part of that process, and I thank God that I have that opportunity.

And if I can find God's love and mercy even in mundane spreadsheets of health insurance claims, just imagine where else in this world you can find it, too.

Amen.