

**“Disbelieved”**  
**Rev. Maeve Hammond**  
**John 9:1-41**  
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When I was little, my parents separated and later divorced. They shared custody of me, so I split time between my mother’s family and my father’s family. My father had a more limited custody arrangement, meaning that I would only see him for a few hours once a week and every-other weekend. In total, I spent about four evenings a month at his house with my stepmother and two half-sisters. There’s one memory I have from my time with them that I’d like to share with you today, in connection with our Scripture reading from The Gospel of John 9:1-38. This is a memory that is benign in its content, or, rather, there is nothing that happens that is particularly jarring or significant. Yet, still, it is a memory that often resurfaces for me as an adult. In fact, it came up as I was reading the passage from John 9 in preparation for today’s service.

When I was four or five, I shared a bedroom with my oldest sister, who is ten years my senior. We each had a twin bed with a little nightstand between us. On her side of the room, there was a small closet. Since I was so infrequently at my father’s house, I didn’t keep many things there. Really, the closet belonged to my sister. So, tell me why, in this memory I’m sitting inside the open doors to the closet. I’m on the floor beside disorganized heaps of clothes, shoes, and old schoolwork. Clearly, everything had been thrown in, not carefully arranged. I crane my neck to look up at four people standing over me: my father, stepmother, and half-sisters. It’s evening, and the light from the overhead ceiling fan hurts my eyes as I squint to see them and the looks of anger and disappointment on their faces. They’re really upset with me. In their mind, I’ve done something bad, almost unforgivable.

Why do they think this? Here’s what I remember. My oldest sister had been going through her closet when she found a pile of old, forgotten Barbie dolls—that is, old, forgotten, vandalized, and (in some cases) decapitated Barbie dolls [laugh]. Apparently, someone had

given the Barbies an absolutely appalling makeover with scissors, permanent marker, and some (shall we say) creativity. The dolls had Sharpie ink smeared over their mouths, cheeks, and eyes, which made them look more like Bozo the Clown than the ideal standard of Western femininity immortalized in plastic. Some of the dolls still had their heads intact. However, the decapitated Barbies had evidently lost their heads for good, as only their bodies remained. They really lived up to the old saying: “I would lose my head if it wasn’t attached!” (terrible joke)

Let’s return to my family’s grievance. They believed I had vandalized these poor dolls. My father and stepmother were very protective of my sisters, who they saw as victims to the cruel fate of a feckless (at best) or vindictive (at worst) vandal. My sisters lamented the loss of their Barbies. “We played with these all the time! We loved these dolls!” they cried.

I’m a little kid sitting on the floor, and I’m looking up at my family. They’re all so much bigger and taller and older than I am. Do you remember being a really little kid and just thinking how *big* and *tall* and *old* everyone was? A ten-year-old is basically an adult when you’re four or five. As my family expresses how hurt they are and how upset they are with me, I feel I have no choice but to defend myself. The more they ground themselves in their perspective and assumptions about what I did or didn’t do, the louder and more desperate I became.

“I didn’t do this! Why do you think I would do this?” I argued. Yet, my words proved futile. The four of them had made up their minds long before I had said anything.

I’m sure you’re wondering now: so, did little Maeve do it? The answer is... no, I didn’t! I was not the Barbie doll vandal! Here’s why: 1) I don’t play with Barbies, and 2) I don’t lie. 1) *I don’t play with Barbies*, and 2) *I don’t lie*. These were the two arguments I kept repeating over and over again to try to convince my family of my innocence.

The first argument, *I don’t play with Barbies*, was mostly true. If you’ve heard my past few sermons where I talk about my childhood, you already know I was kind of a weird kid. (I think you have to be a little weird to be a pastor, anyways, but that’s besides the point.) Part of my weirdness meant that I didn’t really care to play with toys. I didn’t give them little stories or

names or personalities. Instead, I really liked to categorize and line up my toys in order. There's a picture of me when I was probably six years old, and all of my little animal figurines are lined up on a desk. I was very proud. That's how I "played." This is what I did with Barbies: I just lined them up to look at them. As I was arguing with my family, I remember thinking to myself, *don't you know me at all?* If you knew me, *you would know I don't play with Barbies.*

The second argument, *I don't lie*, was extremely (almost problematically) true. Being truthful was a huge core part of who I was as a kid. I wasn't allowed to lie. In fact, lying was treated as a sin – "thou shalt not lie." This got me in trouble in school a few times because I could be brutally honest to other kids and teachers (but, that's another sermon). The thought that I would disobey not only my family, but also my own self and God, felt like a slap in the face. *Don't you know me at all?* If you knew me, *you would know I don't lie.*

[Pause] I'm not sharing this story to publicly shame anyone in my family. In fact, as an adult, I can understand why a four-or-five-year-old would be the most likely Barbie vandal suspect. I imagine my sisters—a tween and teen at the time—may have felt sad and angry to realize a part of their childhood had been damaged or destroyed. Perhaps, they felt the need to defend themselves against this loss. My father and stepmother spent much more time with my sisters. In a sense, the four of them had built their home together. It's possible they wanted to keep the peace with my sisters, even at the cost of causing me discomfort. While I don't believe their intentions were bad, yet, still, their impact was hurtful to me as a child and lingers on as an adult. *Their intentions weren't bad, but their impact was hurtful.* [Pause]

I share this story because I think it will be largely relatable, particularly in relationship with our John passage. While we may not have been in this same situation, we likely *have* been in a situation where someone—maybe even someone of higher authority—didn't believe us. We know what's true. We try to convince them. We make our crystal-clear arguments. We advocate. We argue or even yell. Yet, no matter our efforts, we are still disbelieved. It's a maddening experience, isn't it? To not be believed when we *know* who we are and what we've done.

The Gospel of John is the fourth, and final, gospel telling of the life, ministry, and death of Jesus Christ. Scholar Mark A. Matson calls John the “spiritual gospel” out of the four, as it depicts the “crucial role of faith in Jesus’ life” (1). Matson’s commentaries on John and our lectionary passage will help guide our theological interpretation of the healing of the man born blind. The “initial account of Jesus’ life” is a “series of miracles called ‘signs’” (Matson 1). In fact, the first eleven chapters of John have been called the “Book of Signs” (Matson 1). Jesus’ signs are moreso deeper representations of faith in the Trinity than merely “miraculous activity,” as Matson calls it (1). Through his signs, we, his readers and followers, receive a fuller picture of who “Jesus says he is and how people should react to him” (Matson 2). Jesus’ signs reveal who he is. We are told to believe in Jesus, and we are simply told to believe in his signs. However, his signs provoke disbelief and produce controversy for the people of the ancient world and, perhaps, even for us.

As he walks through Jerusalem, Jesus approaches a man who had been blind since birth. This man does not ask for healing, it should be noted. Jesus heals him in order to answer a theological question posed by one of his disciples. The man’s neighbors cannot believe that he is no longer blind. They even go so far as to question whether or not he is the same man. The Pharisees become aware of Jesus’ sign, and the hostility between Jesus and the religious leaders intensifies. “Hardly able to believe it,” Matson writes, “they keep asking one another if this can be the man who was blind, while *he keeps asserting that it really is he*” (58). *He keeps asserting that it really is he*. The man retells the story and reiterates his truth: Jesus healed him, he did as Jesus told him, and Jesus is a prophet (Matson 58). It must be exhausting, mustn’t it? To have to explain yourself over and over again and be met with scrutiny and disbelief?

Matson calls the neighbors’ and Pharisees’ reaction to Jesus’ sign a “crisis of faith.” A *crisis of faith*. I agree with Matson. The neighbors and the Pharisees are in quite the conundrum—a perspectival pickle, you could say. The man’s truth makes them uncomfortable.

The man's truth forces them to directly face a fact that contradicts and upends the reality they had taken for granted.

"Well, that can't be true," the neighbors may have said. "There is no prophet. No one in a human body can perform signs."

"Well, that can't be true," the Pharisees may have said. "He's no prophet. He's a sinner. No sinner can perform signs."

But, it was true. *It is true.* The man was telling the truth. No matter how much his neighbors or the religious leaders denied or disbelieved him, the truth is an unshakeable fact that they must accept. If they can't accept this fact, they effectively put their heads in the sand and avoid engaging with a reality that calls to them. *It's time to wake up,* Jesus' sign instructs. *You can't keep yourself closed off from this reality forever.* [Pause]

While I struggle with the use of blindness as a metaphor for spiritual or ethical ignorance, I also recognize it is used powerfully and repetitively in the Gospels. I may not choose to use the same metaphor today, but I can acknowledge that the divinely-inspired authors of Scripture were using the literary and theological tools they had to describe signs and faith. If you are curious about this metaphor, I invite you to learn more about a branch of liberation theology called disability theology. To start researching what liberation theologians have written about representations of disability and "healing" in Scripture, you could begin with Nancy L Eiesland's *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability*. Again, the title is: *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability*. Published in 1994, this groundbreaking text was the first of its kind in its exploration of biblical disability. [Pause]

Disbelief, whether over signs or Barbie dolls, is a very ancient and very human experience. When we encounter a truth that has us questioning our own understanding of right and wrong, who is the victim and who is at fault, who deserves healing and who has sin, we may likely feel ourselves perpetuating disbelief. When we are told our truth isn't—*couldn't be*—reality, we are the recipients of others' disbelief. For both sides, the disbeliever and the

disbelieved, the challenge lies in repairing the rift between what *should* have been and what *really* is. This is hard work. And, unfortunately, unless the disbelievers are willing to open themselves to truth, the disbelieved will continue being questioned, scrutinized, or even scapegoated.

But, listen, friends, because there is good news. Jesus shows us that our truth is important and real. Jesus shows us that we are all capable of changing our hearts and minds to accept a new reality that we would have preferred to stay hidden. Jesus shows us that the foundation of faith was not built upon assumptions and accusations. The foundation of faith was not built upon the arrogance that we know the way of the world, that we know what is best, that we know what is true and holy and good. *No*. Jesus' sign in John 9 shows us that the foundation of faith is trust. It is humility. It is a willingness to let go of control. It is listening. It is putting our ego to the side to make space for the possibilities of what could be.

The next time you encounter a situation where you are disbelieving of another's truth, I invite you to take these three steps. 1) *Slow down*. We cannot really be in good faith together if we are anxious and hurried. 2) *Listen*. Don't assume you know the answers. 3) *Ask questions*. Try to learn. Be vulnerable enough to show what you might not know. Leave pride at the door. Again: slow down, listen, and ask questions. If something about the situation still doesn't feel right to you after these three steps, try them again.

Beloved church, God has given us the gift of faith. May we apply it to all things in our life—small and big. May we be open, curious, and childlike enough to receive contradiction and confusion. May we be vulnerable enough to wonder and inquire. May we be humble in our beliefs, not self-righteous in our disbelief. Amen.