

“The Room” says that because the boy was blind at birth his parents were exposed as sinners. Ah, but as the boy grew into an adult, the questions changed: maybe it wasn’t so much what the boys’ parents did, rather it must have been his disposition – only someone who is a sinner at heart would be blind from birth.

The conventional wisdom was so pervasive that it was seemingly assumed by everyone on the street. Such that, when Jesus’ disciples passed the man born blind on the street, they asked their teacher, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents?”

How was that conventional wisdom formed? Where did it get its authority? None of the Hebrew scriptures attribute blindness or deafness to sinfulness. There are a couple of places that mention generational consequences of sin, but it has no bearing on parts of the body that are inoperative. In fact, during our Lenten study on what Jesus taught disciples to pray, we skimmed through the so-called “Holiness Code” in Leviticus 19 – a list of rules and guidelines God passed onto the covenant community to enable them to “be holy, for I *Adonai* your God am holy.” It is from verse 17 that Jesus made part two of the greatest commandment: “you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am *Adonai*.”

But concerning today’s story, the Holiness Code states: 14 You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind; you shall fear your God: I am *Adonai*.

So it is curious how this correlation of sinfulness to blindness is so pervasive. Clearly it had been fomented somewhere, and as the story in John 9 unfolds, the stigma against blind folks appears to trace back to the religious authorities. As word of the healed man's sight spread, he was eventually brought to the Pharisees to bear witness to the miracle. Instead of celebrating that a major stumbling block had been removed from the man, the religious leaders became obsessed with the fact that the healing occurred on the Sabbath; they wondered *what type of sinful sot* had the audacity to do that *type of work* on the Sabbath? So they badgered the man. Then they badgered his parents. And when the authorities didn't get the answers that suited their inquest, they badgered the man again. Eventually, banishing him from The Room. The Room gave them permission to do stuff like that - throw people out just because they didn't understand them.

Okay - let me explain what I mean by The Room. I was introduced to the concept in a thought-piece by historian Jermaine Fowler who writes *The Humanity Archive*. Fowler was commenting on the situation that arose after the United States Men's Hockey Team was invited to the State of the Union address after winning Gold. The United States Women's Hockey Team - who also won Gold - was extended an invitation because the US President told the men's locker room, with a laugh and an implied wink, that he "would be impeached" if he didn't invite the women.

Fowler goes on to explain how that particular locker room stood in for all the other Rooms where men are formed and bonded.

The room is not new. It has just changed addresses.

Before 1972, women were legally excluded from athletic programs, facilities, and funding at schools across America. Title IX forced open a pipeline. The locker room was never only about the game. It was where coaches became connected to boosters who became connected to legislators, where athletes became businessmen, where the informal architecture of American power reproduced itself through sweat and handshakes and things said in rooms where women were not allowed. The establishment fought Title IX with everything it had. ...

In January 2012, Virginia Rometty became the first woman named CEO of IBM. The four male CEOs before her had each been invited to join Augusta National, the golf club that hosts the Masters, where the membership list reads like a Fortune 500 roster and where, for eight decades, the real business of American power was conducted between rounds.

Rometty showed up to the Masters that spring anyway. She sat in the stands. She entertained clients. She wore pink. There was no green jacket, the one that signals membership, the one every male CEO before her had received automatically. IBM said nothing. She said nothing. She had to pretend the snub was not happening while sitting inside the building that was snubbing her.

The room changes addresses. The door stays the same.

I'm guessing that some of you understand this Room?

Fowler continues,

But the room destroys the men inside it too. Not equally. Not in the same ways. Destroy is still the right word. Boys learn the code early. Do not cry. Do not be vulnerable. Do not show that you care. Every boy who conforms commits a self-betrayal. He learns to shut down the parts of himself that could love, that could connect, that could choose something other than performance. He practices the shutdown so many times it stops feeling like a choice. The men who laughed in that locker room are not free. They have been practicing that laugh since the first time a room asked them to choose between belonging and feeling, and they chose belonging because the cost of feeling was too high. The room did not ask them to believe the joke. It only asked them to perform it.

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That is not an excuse. It is a diagnosis. And it is more indicting than anger because it means the room reproduces itself not through monsters but through ordinary men doing what ordinary men have always been asked to do. Not through the man who commits the assault. Through the hundred men who laughed and never asked where the road was going.

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We have all been in a version of this room. We have laughed at something that was not funny, stayed quiet when we should not have, performed belonging in a room that cost us something to be in. The man who laughed on the speakerphone and Virginia Rometty sitting in the stands in pink are doing the same thing at different altitudes, performing acceptance of terms they did not set and cannot change without leaving the room entirely.

{<https://thehumanityarchive.substack.com/p/the-room>}

When Jesus (and his disciples) come across the blind man in the street, Jesus sees an opportunity to address the injustice caused by those who have been authorized to be in The Room. You recall that the disciples ask Jesus “2 ‘who sinned ... 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.’”

On the surface, it might seem that the work of God that needed to be revealed was for the man to be able to see. But Jesus follows up his comments with the rather esoteric statement: “4 We must work the works of (the One) 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.”

Hmmm...okay. This appears to be something a bit more revolutionary than giving sight to a man who never had it. And sure enough something much deeper happens as the story unfolds.

The Council that takes on this informal “trial” of the man born blind is the Hebraic version of The Room. Here a group of men in power are wrestling with something that is out of their control and something they do not understand ... and that is unnerving to people in The Room. They do what they do when feeling insecure – they go on the offensive. They bring the man in for questioning (“I am he,” he kept saying!). His truth doesn’t satisfy them so they bring in his parents to verify he is who he says he is (“he is of age. He will speak for himself,” they tell them). So the Keepers of the Room shoo out the parents and call the man back. He repeats his truth and finally gets under their skin

when he sardonically asks them, “Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?” That’s when The Room expels him.

In the moment, he was probably just glad to be rid of those bullies, but still...they are the temple authorities...they just booted him out of the House of God. That had to sting.

And that’s when he had his moment. That’s when he realized if The Room was going to treat him like that, he didn’t want to be part of The Room. He realized that The Room wasn’t the House of God after all. The House of God was standing in front of him – the man with new eyes saw the One who claimed him and he knew that God-in-flesh was out in the world working to break down everything The Room was doing to outcasts like him. All the light for which he had been hungering had now been sated, and he knew who to follow.

Jesus then turned his gaze on The Room. It’s hard to say when or how the Pharisee’s version of The Room became so calloused against those who suffer; or, when they forgot that Sabbath was established by *Adonai*, hallowing it so that everyone – regardless of who they are – would have a day of freedom. But they couldn’t imagine that freedom meant so much more than freedom from work:

freedom from barriers,

freedom from being pushed to the margins of society,

freedom from being treated with scorn.

Being freed from all of that in order to come face to face with God was what equated to holiness.

Whatever happened over the centuries of Pharisees believing that only they could rightly interpret the law, they are so sure that they are right ... that they “see.” Jesus knew he couldn’t “fix” them ... help them “see the light.” Instead, he let them wrestle with their situation. He said to them,

39 “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 who were with 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.

The Room has been exposed.

All those who dwell therein were challenged with Jesus’ question. I’m assuming we all are as well.

Our text from Ephesians encourages us and challenges us:

Walk as children of light 9 for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. 10 Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord. 11 Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness; rather, expose them. 12 For it is shameful even to mention what such people do secretly, 13 but everything exposed by the light becomes visible...

It would appear that Jesus reveals God’s glory by uncovering what people do secretly to heap shame upon others. Being vigilant, being present, being unafraid to be dispelled from The Room is part of walking as

children of light. In fact, it is a major step toward feeding a world that is desperately hungry for the light.

May our eyes be opened. May our courage be stoked. May we be reminded of the privilege and challenge of following the One who seeks to reveal the glory and holiness of God today. Amen.