

Sermon for Sunday, March 22, 2020
Fourth Sunday in Lent, Year A
Sermon Text(s): John 9:1-41
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“Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

The question would have been a natural one in Jesus’ day; **it was widely assumed that sin and physical illness were connected in a directly causal relationship:** if you were sick or had a disability of any sort, it must have been because you had sinned. If you were *born* with an illness or disability, either you must have committed some sin while still in the womb, or your misfortune was due to the sins of your parents. In asking this question, the disciples were trying to determine which category they should place this man in to explain his abnormality, to find someone to blame.

Despite the advances of modern science, we’re not so different in 21st century America from the disciples who sought to explain the condition of this blind man by blaming it on sin. **As a society, we’re always looking for ways to blame someone for the illnesses or abnormalities of others:**

“That poor child is deformed because her mother used drugs during her pregnancy.”

“If he’d stopped smoking, he wouldn’t have gotten lung cancer.”

“They got the coronavirus because they didn’t follow the CDC’s rules about social distancing.”

And if we can’t find a reasonable person on whom to pin the blame, we pin it on God.

“Why, God? What have I – or my sister or my uncle or my friend – done to deserve this?” we ask, the assumption being that illness and suffering are only inflicted upon those who “deserve” it as punishment for something they have done wrong.

But the interesting thing is that **Jesus rejects this assumption that physical illness is an indication of the presence of sin.**

“Neither this man or his parents sinned,” Jesus says, “he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.”

But is this really any better? The man’s blindness – and by consequence, the miserable life he would have experienced as a blind person in first-century Palestine, with no real opportunities for making a living open to him besides begging by the side of the road – was created just so Jesus could come along and perform a miracle? Does that mean all our sufferings are created just so God can be glorified through them? Certainly God *can* be glorified through our sufferings, but does God create them on purpose – does God *make* us suffer – just to glorify himself? What kind of God would that be?

Several biblical scholars have suggested that that is not necessarily what Jesus meant to say in this passage. Some scholars propose an alternative translation of the Greek text from the one we heard this morning, a translation that goes like this:

“Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but in order that the works of God might be revealed in him, we must work the works of him who sent me while it is day.” (9:3-4a).¹

In this translation, Jesus does not give an explanation for the man’s blindness, but simply accepts it as a given. **Rather than dwelling in the “why” questions, Jesus is concerned with the more practical “what” questions – what can I do for this man now, and how can God’s glory be revealed in his life, regardless of his condition or his past?**

In a similar vein, the blind man is not interested in explaining or justifying Jesus’ behavior when he is interrogated by the Pharisees; he is only concerned with testifying to his personal experience of Jesus.

“We know this man is a sinner,” the Pharisees say to him, trying to get him to speak ill of Jesus. “I do not know whether he is a sinner,” the formerly

¹ Craig R. Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 105.

blind man replies. “One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.” He offers no other explanations beyond this simple statement.

In the story as we have received it, **both the blind man and Jesus are concerned with the here and now – with responding to the facts of the present situation without over-analyzing them.**

Jesus does not try to explain the reason why this man was born blind to his disciples, and the blind man does not try to justify Jesus’ actions to the Pharisees. **Jesus sees a need and responds to it; the blind man receives a gift and testifies to it.**

The disciples are so caught up with trying to find a reason for the man’s blindness, to find someone to blame for this misfortune, that they miss seeing a real human being in need in front of them. The Pharisees are so caught up in arguments over what is and isn’t lawful according to religious tradition that they miss the miracle that has taken place in front of them.

John’s Gospel this morning is inviting us, in the midst of this global pandemic that has restricted most of us to our homes, to let go of the urge to explain, to blame, to analyze, and to justify, and simply open our eyes to the world around us.

Where is there a need that you can respond to, even from the midst of your quarantine, regardless of the reasons it exists?

Where have you received a gift that you can testify to with gratefulness?

Our personal stories about how we have experienced God working in our lives are the most powerful evangelism tools we have.

What is the “one thing you do know” about God in your life?

I invite you to share your answer to that question with someone in your life this week, either online or through a phone call, and see what happens.

Maybe you too have the power to open the eyes of the blind.