

March 26, 2017

John 9:1-17

John 9:18-41

Who is this healing a man born blind?

For the past few Sundays, we have been in the light and we have been in the dark with Jesus. We have been in the noonday sun with Jesus and a Samaritan woman. And we have listened in the dark to Jesus and Nicodemus. Light and dark, night and day, in the gospel of John, people see or they do not see. They are in the light or they are in the dark. It is a theme that continues through the entire gospel of John. And it is the theme of our story today as Jesus opens the eyes of a man born blind. Because Jesus is the light of the world and he has come to help us see again.

Today our story is about seeing and not seeing. It's about recognizing and not recognizing God among us. And in Jesus' time, the religious folks were sure they knew how to do that. The Pharisees and Jews, John calls them, were certain they knew all about God. And who was righteous and who was not. And who was in and who was out. They were sure that they knew. Maybe you have known some religious folks like that. People who were sure that they could see. People confident in

God's judgment. The verdict is in. Guilty. Maybe you know folks like that. Maybe you have been like that. I know, if I'm honest, I have. I have been certain that I could see. Certain of God's judgment of others.

In John's gospel, the religious folks think they can see. It's always the religious folks in John's gospel who think they know how God works.

They know that God blesses the righteous and makes them prosper. And God makes the sinful suffer. They know all about it from the Bible, how God punishes the disobedient and smites the wicked. God flooded the world of Noah. God incinerated the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. God sent plagues on the Egyptians and caused the evil prophets of Baal to be put to the sword. Even the Israelites, for goodness' sake, God's chosen people, spent 40 years wandering in the wilderness because they disobeyed God. God does not like disobedience. It makes God angry; so angry, it says in Exodus 20:5, that when people are sinful, even their children will suffer. Sin causes suffering, according to the Bible. And so, the religious folks believed logically the reverse must be true as well. If there was suffering, it must be because of sin. Someone must have done something wrong. And that's exactly where Jesus' disciples start when

they meet the man born blind, “Whose sin caused this suffering? Was it his sin,” they ask Jesus, “or his parent’s sin that made him blind?”

Now it’s not the religious leaders who are asking this. It’s Jesus’ disciples. Even they believed that suffering came from sin. “So who was it?,” they ask. “Who is responsible? This man or his parents? Who do we blame?” And even now we ask that question when it comes to suffering and illness and affliction. Even now, we wonder who it was that must have done something wrong. And we shake our heads and we tsk-tsk and we judge. And we blame the sick for being sick. And we blame the poor for being poor. We blame the kids in poor school districts that they have poor school districts. We blame the people practicing voodoo paganism for the earthquake in Haiti. It’s because of immorality in America that we were attacked on 9/11. It’s because of all the violent people in the Middle East, that they have so much war over there. Because the way some people see it, bad things happen to bad people. Suffering and affliction are problems that people have tried to make sense of for a long time. We have tried to figure out why and how and how God fits in to all this. And today our story is all about the way we

look at suffering. And Jesus invites us to see three things about it. First, that suffering happens regardless of sin. Second, that God is with those who suffer. They are not alone. And third, that God's work is to heal the suffering creation.

First, suffering happens. We know that it does. We see it all around us. We have felt it for ourselves. Loss and devastation happen no matter how good or how bad we are. Yes, we know that there are times when we bring suffering on ourselves. We eat too many hot wings and we suffer. We run up the credit card bill and we suffer. We neglect our homework and we suffer. We neglect our loved ones and we suffer. We try to fill our lonely hearts and dry spirits with new purchases and entertainment and we suffer. We know that we can, indeed, make bad choices and experience bad consequences. But there are times when bad things just happen. And there is no reason and no cause.

Jason Micheli, a Methodist pastor, husband, and father, writes about doing a funeral for a twelve year old boy who died of cancer. He himself has a virulent bone cancer that is in remission for now. He wrote in the funeral eulogy for the boy: "I've realized there's not a lot of which I'm

certain. I don't know why God calls this creation "very good" yet so often it feels "very bad." I don't know why the prayers of mothers and fathers and brothers and sisters and friends...go unanswered. I can't answer the why question. And anyone who tells you they can... is a liar."<sup>1</sup>

But still we wonder why. We want to have an answer like the disciples who are certain that someone is to blame for the blind man's condition. You can hear their need for a clear answer in the two options they offer Jesus. Because there are only two options. "Was it EITHER the man OR his parents who sinned?" It must be one or the other. Either---or. Because someone did something wrong. So who was it? There must be a reason for suffering. No, Jesus says. No one did anything wrong. "Neither this man nor his parents sinned." Not the father. Not the mother. Not the man himself when he was a baby in his mother's belly. No one sinned. It just happened.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://tamedcynic.org/the-greatest-in-the-kingdom/>

In a way, it's comforting to hear that suffering is not always someone's fault. There's not always someone to blame. But on the other hand, it's terrifying. Because then suffering is not someone's fault. There is no one to blame. And there is no one to convict. And there is nothing to stop it from happening to anyone. To me, to you. To well-meaning, good-hearted, God-fearing religious people. WE might end up just like them. We might experience tragedy and hardship. We might be caught up in a devastating story we never imagined for ourselves, or our loved ones. But that's exactly what Jesus wants us to know about suffering and affliction; for the sake of others and for the sake of ourselves, we must see that suffering happens regardless of sin and our first impulse should not be placing blame.

Suffering happens regardless of sin, first of all. And second, God is with those who suffer. Which is the opposite of what the religious people in Jesus' world believed. They believed God was with the prosperous and the healthy. Not with the poor and the blind and the lame and the sick. Therefore they did not need to be with them. They did not and need not have them in their communities. Lepers were literally expelled from

their towns. Handicapped and disabled people were literally excluded from the temple grounds. The religious people had their religious reasons. God wanted a people who were pure and uncontaminated. God wanted worship that was holy and unblemished. But even now, we do the same thing perhaps. We seek God among the beautiful and the strong. We look for God only with the lively and healthy. Not with the elderly at a care facility. Or with the sick in the hospital. Or with the paraplegic or those with mental illnesses or autism. Or depression or ADHD. We hesitate to think of God being there. Because that would be hard. That would mean our God is the God of the vulnerable and broken. Amy Julia Becker's daughter Penny was born with Down's syndrome. She had holes in her heart. She needed tubes in her ears. She needed so many surgeries as a baby. As she grew, her life was a medically fragile one. But Penny lavished smiles upon anyone in view, and she worked hard at everything from sitting up to walking. Her mother said, "It took me a while to be able to see Penny instead of her diagnosis... When I thought of her in terms of Downs syndrome, I thought of her as separate from me. But once I was able to see her--her bright smile and her

sparkling eyes, her love for reading, her tender concern for other people-  
-then I also began to see her, really see her and how connected we  
were... Her disability was like a magnifying glass that showed me my  
own humanity.”<sup>2</sup>

The religious people and the disciples see a blind man. They see  
disability. They see failure. They do not see a person made in the image  
of God. But Jesus does. Jesus sees a man who happens to be blind and  
also happens to God’s beloved child. He sees someone who can be part  
of something amazing and important. Who can reveal the glory of God  
in the world. And that God is with him. As God is with all who are  
afflicted or suffering. As God is with Jesus in his suffering. As God will  
be there on the cross, wounded and disfigured. God will be there, broken  
and dying. God is there in that hurt and pain with Jesus. With us.  
God is with those who suffer. Because God’s work is to heal the  
suffering creation. That’s Jesus’ third point. In our gospel story, the  
religious folks are unhappy about what Jesus has done. They are truly

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<sup>2</sup> [http://day1.org/7796-on\\_scripture\\_vulnerability\\_the\\_gift\\_not\\_fully\\_valued\\_john\\_9141\\_by\\_amy\\_julia\\_becker](http://day1.org/7796-on_scripture_vulnerability_the_gift_not_fully_valued_john_9141_by_amy_julia_becker)

bothered that Jesus healed this blind man. It is not a miracle to them. It is not God at work among them. No, they do not see God at work in this at all. What they see is Jesus violating the Sabbath. They see Jesus sinning and breaking God's law because he healed on a day when no one should work. It was one of the ten great Commandments. On the Sabbath day, everyone rested because God rested. After the six days of creation. God completed God's work and took a Sabbath break. So should God's people. So should Jesus.

But Jesus is doing God's work. His work is to restore creation. And it is not done. It is not complete, not when there is suffering. Not when people are sick or broken. Not when there are folks marginalized and oppressed. Not when creation is held captive by the powers of sin and darkness. Jesus has come to complete God's work. And just like the Creator in Genesis, who takes mud and makes human beings, Jesus takes mud and completes the work on this man. He finishes the creation and restores his life. That's what Jesus has come to do. He has come to restore us. To heal us and open our eyes and give us new life. And he will not rest until that work is complete. Until he is lifted up on the

cross. And gives his life for the life of the world. "It is finished," he will say with his last breath. Only then will Jesus rest. Only then will he have his Sabbath as he awaits the dawn of Easter morning. The religious folks couldn't see God at work. But I bet we can. I bet we can see God's glory in the midst of brokenness. I bet we can see God working tirelessly in our difficulties. I bet we can see that God will not stop until all things are made new.

Suffering does happen. It happens all around us and within us. And it is not just for the sinful or the wicked. It is not a punishment from God. It is just a creation that is not quite finished. Not quite full of the abundant life God intends. But God is with us, beside us. And God's glory will be revealed. And creation will be finished. And all of us will be made complete. May we see it. May we know it.