

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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"Blind Theology"

John 9:1-41 (NRSV)

As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. [2] His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, 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. [4] We must work the works of him 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." [6] When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, [7] saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. [8] The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?" [9] Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him." He kept saying, "I am the man." [10] But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" [11] He answered, "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' Then I went and washed and received my sight." [12] They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know."

[13] They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. [14] Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. [15] Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, "He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see." [16] Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath." But others said, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" And they were divided. [17] So they said again to the blind man, "What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened." He said, "He is a prophet."

[18] The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight [19] and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" [20] His parents answered, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; [21] but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself." [22] His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. [23] Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him."

[24] So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, "Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner." [25] He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." [26] They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" [27] He answered them, "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?" [28] Then they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. [29] We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from." [30] The man answered, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from,

and yet he opened my eyes. [31] We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. [32] Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. [33] If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." [34] They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" And they drove him out.

[35] Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" [36] He answered, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him." [37] Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." [38] He said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped him. [39] Jesus said, "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 near 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.

FAITH TSUNAMI

A famous minister was called by a newspaper reporter soon after the devastating Tsunami hit Southeast Asia several years ago. You may remember that in just a few moments whole villages were swept out to sea in a wave of terrible destruction. The report said, "I'm doing a story on the Tsunami and its aftermath. How do you as a person of faith explain this event?"

How would you respond to that question? How do you as a person of faith explain this event? Let me put the question in a different way. We say that God is good. How could a good God let something like this happen?

The reporter's question also comes with a challenge. By the way he asks his question he is saying in effect, "If I were God I would run this world differently."

In theology we have always recognized this problem. We even have a name for it. We call it theodicy. In the words of a book written by Rabbi Harold Kushner, in this portion of theology we ask the age old question, "Why do bad things happen to good people?"

Every time I visit with a family who is facing tragedy the question comes up in one form or another. "Pastor, why did this happen? How do you as a person of faith explain this?"

Quite often the people involved are very bitter about their experience. They have the belief that God helps those who are faithful and righteous, and as far as they know they are good people. So why did this bad thing happen? They believe that they didn't deserve what happened to them.

Rabbi Kushner did not write his book and ask this question out of a scholarly interest in the questions of theodicy. He wrote this book out of personal struggle.

His young son was dying of a terrible, incurable disease. And the glib answers he received to his questions about faith and life were no longer satisfactory. His child had

done nothing wrong. He was a person of faith and integrity. Why did this terrible thing happen?

YOU GET WHAT YOU DESERVE

The problem of tragedy and suffering is perhaps the most difficult problem that we deal with as people of faith. In Jesus' day people had an answer to the problem of suffering. You get what you deserve. If you're having problems then you've done something to cause those problems or perhaps God is punishing you for some secret sin.

We see this approach in the book of Job. Job loses everything. He loses his family. He loses his livelihood, and he loses his health. Even his wife gives up on Job. She asks, "Why do you keep on trying. Curse God and die."

I sometimes wonder if that Henny Youngman line wasn't first spoken by Job to God, "Take my wife ... please!"

People wonder why these terrible things have happened to Job. And his theologically minded friends come to Job to give him their best guess. They say,

"Maybe you've done something wrong. Think about it real hard. Have you done something to wrong a righteous God? This is more than bad luck. This is God's punishment. You need to 'fess up' and repent of your sins."

There are many people who take that same approach even today. They believe that the good things in their life are due to the fact that they have worked hard, paid their taxes and kept their "nose clean." Now those are not bad things to do. We know that without hard work and honest living we cannot be successful.

But, that doesn't guarantee success. Job's story is not a unique one. We all know that life can come apart at the seams in a New York minute. And the question posed by Job's comforters occurs to us as well though we might not have the courage to speak it our loud. In our hearts we wonder, "What have I done to deserve this?"

A MAN BORN BLIND

That was the question that the disciples asked Jesus in our lesson for today. As they walked down the road they saw a man who was blind from birth.

In Jesus' day this was a terrible tragedy. No Palestinians with Disabilities Act existed in Jesus' world. There was no vocational training. There was no special education. There was only begging and condemnation.

Surely God wouldn't do something like this to someone who was righteous. There had to be a reason. The Jewish theologians had an answer. God was punishing the person for some terrible sin ... either his own sin or a sin committed by his parents.

Curious disciples wanted to know, “Jesus tell us. Who sinned, this man or his parents that this man was born blind?”

It’s been my experience that often those who observe the sufferings of others from afar often ask questions like this.

If we have good children, then we feel free to criticize those parents who obviously didn’t do such a good job with their kids. If we’re doing better financially than someone else, then it’s because we’re more responsible and hard working. If our marriage is going well when someone else’s marriage is falling apart, we know the answer. It’s because we’ve taken our marriage vows seriously and that other person hasn’t.

RAINS ON THE JUST AND THE UNJUST

If you think that way, I’ve got bad news for you. Tragedy can come into your life too. It rains on the just and the unjust. The earth’s crust can cool and as a result the plates shift, an earthquake happens on the floor of the ocean and the big wave will come your way. None of us are immune from tragedies. Suffering and uncertainty are part and parcel of what it means to human.

In fact the Bible even encourages us to think about this rather sobering fact. The Psalmist wrote that we human beings are like the grass in the field. We may sprout and flower in the morning, but we will be withered and dry by dusk.

I like to watch that TV series on the history channel entitled Mega-Disasters. This program explores such questions as: What would happen if a meteor hit the earth? Or suppose a huge Tsunami hit the east coast of the United States as a result of a volcano off the coast of Africa falling into the sea?

Suppose Yellowstone Park once again became a super volcano and filled the world’s atmosphere with ash as it did 600,000 years ago? Actually, the question is not if something like this will happen. The question is when something like this will happen.

My wife teases me about watching this series. She suggests that I should spend my time thinking about more positive things. She might be right on that, but I also think that it is good for us to consider the fact that our hold on life is very fragile. As the Psalmist also put it, we need to “number our days” so that we can gain a “heart of wisdom.”

SUFFERING AND THE CHURCH

We in the church shouldn’t be surprised that there is suffering in our life and in the world. Suffering doesn’t come as news to God’s people. Suffering stands at the heart of the Christian faith. A cross takes center stage in the church. And though we don’t have an explanation for unjust suffering we do have an answer.

We say that though we walk through the “valley of the shadow of death” every day God is with us in that valley.

God doesn't cause tragedies to come into lives. God doesn't say, “I think I'll create a tsunami today and wipe out thousands of people.”

But, it does seem that God has created a universe with certain universal laws. Most of the time those laws work to our advantage.

For example, gravity keeps our world together and keeps us on the planet. But, if you walk underneath a ladder at a construction site and a brick falls and hits your head, then gravity works against you.

By and large the dynamic forces at work in our world are good. But, sometimes those forces can create a hurricane or a tsunami or an earthquake. People may be harmed as a result.

But, God is involved even in these negative events. Where is God when tragedy strikes? God is in and with those who seek to bring comfort and healing and hope to the victims of tragedy.

When the reporter asked the minister how he as a person of faith explained this tragedy, he did not know that this same minister had already been on the phone that morning. He was coordinating efforts with his denomination to bring relief to the stricken areas.

Many of you in this very congregation gave generously to support the victims of this disaster. You did the same thing when Hurricane Katrina hit the gulf coast and on numerous other occasions. The money went to something called Presbyterian Disaster Assistance whose motto is “out of chaos hope.”

We as a people of faith don't try to explain suffering. We try to alleviate that suffering in the name of Jesus. We try to bring healing and hope as a foretaste of that coming kingdom in which there will be no more suffering or pain. We wipe away tears in the name of God. We embrace those who are broken by life.

THE HEALING HUMAN TOUCH

When I first entered the ministry I was scared to death of tragedy. When you visit with a person in pain there is a terrible temptation to utter some pious phrase such as, “God doesn't put more on you than you can stand ... or time heals all wounds And so forth.”

Some people desperately wanted to know why this had happened to them. Were they being punished? People almost always feel guilty in the midst of tragedy.

But, I have found that when tragedy strikes the best answer is not a theological explanation, no matter how well reasoned or well intentioned it might be. The best response, the most healing response is the touch of another human being. It is in the human touch that healing occurs on many levels.

That's exactly what Jesus tells his disciples. This man born blind shouldn't be the object of theological speculation and explanation. Instead, this man was an opportunity to display God's compassion as revealed in Jesus. God will be glorified when Jesus touches him. God will be glorified when Jesus heals him.

Jesus said, "When this blind man sees the light, the world will learn a greater truth, the truth that I am the light of the world."

Jesus heals this man in a very earthy way. He spits on the ground, makes mud and rubs it on the blind man's eyes. Then he tells the blind guy to go to the pool of Siloam (which means sent) and wash off his eyes. The blind man does it, and a miracle occurs. The man born blind is now able to see.

MORE THAN A MIRACLE

Now some people get the wrong message from this story. They say, "If only we had enough faith, Jesus could heal us in this way. If we don't have any miracles in our life, then it shows that we don't believe in Jesus enough."

Now don't misunderstand. Of course I believe that God can and sometimes God does intervene in our lives in miraculous ways.

But, it's obvious from this passage that this story is not just about the miracle. It's a story about where we find God. The disciples thought that they could discover God in right answers.

Memorize the catechism and Bible verses. Then you'll have answers to all of life's problems. Are there tragedies in life? The answer is sin. Someone sinned. Someone is being punished in this tragedy.

The Pharisees, the religious leaders of the day thought that they could find God in the right ritual. Do you want to find God? Go to the synagogue on the Sabbath. Obey the religious rules. And rule number one is this: don't work on the Sabbath. That's the road to righteousness.

But, when Jesus healed the man born blind, he did it on the Sabbath. And so when the man who had formerly been blind was taken to the religious leaders, they didn't focus on the obvious thing ... the fact that this man had been miraculously healed.

Instead, they focused on the fact that the man who healed him did it on the Sabbath. Why did Jesus heal this man on the Sabbath? Obviously he could have done it on some other day of the week. Why did Jesus dishonor God by breaking the Sabbath?

The Pharisees were blind to the presence of God in Jesus. They missed the real miracle. God came to them, and they closed their eyes.

WE TOO ARE BLIND

At this point we often become too critical of the Pharisees and are blind to our own problems in this area. People have done terrible things in the name of Christ.

The history of the Christian church is littered with people who missed the miracle in favor of the ritual. Wars have been fought in the name of Christ. Torture has occurred in the name of Christ. The name of Christ has been used to justify slavery and oppression of every sort.

Do you really think that this doesn't apply to us? We often miss the miracle of Christ's presence because we think that we see clearly. Our physical vision may be 20/20 but our spiritual vision is often non-existent. We are blinded by our theological assumptions.

I am often amazed at how cocky and heartless we can be when discussing the spiritual state of other people. Just as the Pharisees and the disciples were willing to dismiss the man born blind as a person "steeped in sin" at his birth, we in the church seem to dismiss those in a trouble as people who have gotten what they deserved.

As one preacher put it, "The world becomes one vast crime scene, and our task is to locate the guilty party. And as long as folk see the world this way, then someone somewhere, has to take the blame."

If we persist in a theology of blame and condemnation, this passage suggests that we might very well run into the judgment of our Lord. And in our conflict we ask Jesus the question the Pharisees asked, "Are we blind?"

And Jesus will respond to us in the same way that he responded to the Pharisees. "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains." (John 9:41)

The greatest sin is to be blinded by the illusion of our own innocence.

Jesus said that the proper question to ask when we find a person alongside the road of life in trouble is not "Who sinned?" but rather "How can I help in the name of Christ? How can I be used by God to bring healing to this broken situation? Who can I hug?"

I once talked with someone about using the hymn Amazing Grace in a worship service. She said, "I like the tune, but I don't like the message. God has saved me, but I'm not a wretch. I'm not blind. I don't want to sing that song."

She was in fact one of the most disturbed, self-centered persons I had ever met. But, she couldn't see it. And so she couldn't sing Amazing Grace. She didn't understand her need for salvation.

Jesus tells us that only those of us who can claim our own sinfulness and our own blindness can be healed.

What about you? Can you sing Amazing Grace?

Can you claim your own need to be healed in the name of Jesus? And having received that grace can you reach out to others in his name?

We are indeed flawed and fragile creatures. But, God seems to delight in bringing light through the eyes of the blind people just like us.

The poet Leonard Cohen put it this way,
"Ring the bells that can still ring. Forget your perfect offering. There is a crack, a crack in everything. That's where the light gets in. That's where the light gets in."

Amen.