

LENT: A Time to Fill Your Cup

Part 4: Opening Our Eyes

The Man Born Blind

John 9:1-41
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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There's not a person in this sanctuary this morning who hasn't experienced firsthand, as well as witnessed in the life of another, a hardship, a tragedy, or a really difficult period of time in life. It could have been a serious illness, the loss of a job, the breakup of a relationship, the death of a loved one, or any number of other adversities.

In all honesty, have you ever gone on and asked of God, "Why?!?" Further, have you ever looked at such events as God's punishment for some sin, or at least asked what purpose God had in mind for causing or allowing such a tragedy or difficult time? If so, then you're in line with what appears to be part of our human nature.

Throughout human history there has been a tendency to connect tragedies, suffering, and hardships in life with some higher divine cause or purpose. When things go wrong, many turn to the thought that God is punishing them for some sin they may have committed. This notion has been around for thousands of years, and is, in fact, built into scripture itself. **Exodus 20:5**, just one of several biblical references, states, "...I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me..."

I don't believe a word of it! I believe they believed it. But I don't believe it is a true reflection of the nature and character of God. What I'm saying is this particular theological understanding of God reflects a limited human understanding of a particular people, in a particular place, at a particular time in history. In other words, these are scriptural words from the minds of humans, not words directly from the mouth of God. What do you believe?

One of the reasons I am so drawn to the Gospel of John is that the author, albeit through his own theological perspective, tries to correct or at least amend some of these ancient notions about God. The story we heard this morning from John 9 is an excellent example.

Jesus and his disciples are walking along and they see a man who had been born blind. The first question asked of Jesus by the disciples is this, **"Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"** The **assumption** being made by the disciples – a carryover from Old Testament times – is that **there is a very real connection and link between suffering (evidently including birth abnormalities) and God's punishment for someone's sinfulness. Underlying this assumption, one that is still common today, is that misfortune is somehow deserved, that human tragedy and suffering is the result of our or someone else's sin, or disobedience to God.** If nothing else, it's believed that somehow it's all part of God's divine plan, that all things happen for a reason, and it's our job to figure out what we're supposed to do or learn.

In the case of the man who was born blind, the disciples even ask if it is a result of *his sin* – **as if an unborn baby could have somehow sinned while still in its mother's womb. That this was even considered a possibility should be appalling to us.** But if the blame doesn't lie with the baby then at least it must be the fault of the parents. Even today there are those who claim **it's always someone's fault.** If it's not someone else's fault, then perhaps worse, many blame themselves. If you sometimes fall into this trap, as I used to do all the time, then I encourage you to remember Jesus' response to his disciples, **"Neither this man nor his parents sinned."**

Jesus puts to rest the notion (even if we still can't) that this man's disability and suffering are caused by sin. What Jesus ultimately reveals, and I am a strong believer in this, is that **God is not the cause and author of our suffering.** What I have come to believe instead is that **when we do suffer, and we all do, God's love and grace can somehow be revealed through our adversity.** This was certainly the case through the man who was born blind.

An important note must be made, however. **Even though Jesus shows us this blind man's suffering is not caused by sin, sin can and does cause suffering** – which can take the form of spiritual, emotional, and at times, physical suffering. Our sinful attitudes and behaviors – for example, forms of abuse directed towards ourselves or others – may indeed cause suffering. But saying that, it can also be stated **not all suffering in life is the direct result of sin.** This is an important distinction. **More importantly, there is indeed a monumental difference between suffering the consequences of our or others' thoughts and actions, and ascribing that suffering to be the direct result of punishment by God.** I would suggest to you, in line with our Lenten theme this year, that understanding this alone, and in and of itself, can help fill our cups.

So even as this biblical story demands that we wrestle with how we understand the relationship between sin and suffering, it also demands that we put ourselves not only into the role of the blind person and the disciples, but also into the role of the Pharisees. With the skill of a master literary craftsman, the author of the Gospel of John fills his story with deep, almost hilarious, **irony. Jesus heals a man who is born blind physically while all those around him are in the dark because they cannot see the truth.** The question and the connection for us is what was the cause of the Pharisee's blindness. The Rev. Steve Garnaas-Holmes, author of the blog unfoldinglight.net, summarizes it this way:

They are not ready to see the man healed, because it contradicts what they believe. For them truly believing is seeing. They don't believe; so they are blind to the miracle in their midst. □□

How like us. We have things figured out. We have people pigeonholed. We have our ideas about God. We have our opinions.

And of course—lucky for us—we're right. Prejudices, judgments, beliefs: delusions, all. They keep us from really seeing... □□

Sometimes we see people the way we've been conditioned to see them, and in our eyes they can't change. It is not God who is absent. It is we who are blind.□□

Jesus told us parables to confuse us, so we would start over.

How dare Jesus suggest that we love the darkness in which we find ourselves! Yet, **perhaps we find some level of comfort and even privilege in that darkness. Perhaps we instinctively know that the light will hurt our eyes.** But as we have all experienced when we've walked from a dark room into one flooded with light, if we're willing to stay in it a while our vision will adjust and we will see much we'd never noticed before. **From a Christian perspective, light indicates what Jesus reveals about the nature and character of God, and the way of life we are called to follow.**

Jill Duffield, editor of the *Presbyterian Outlook* asks us to question "what we see and what we don't, what we notice or don't, what we understand or don't." And as is fitting with the purpose of the season of Lent itself, asks, "**Are we open to the scrutiny of being exposed by the light?**" Like the Pharisees in this biblical story, we are asked to question who we deem worthy of our attention and trust. Duffield asks:

Who do we write off as deserving of their fate? When have we dismissed someone's experience? Failed to value and believe another's experience of faith? Driven out someone who disturbed the norms of our community?

An honest self-examination always proves to be painful. Perhaps that's why many find it easier just to stay in the dark and continue to be spiritually and emotionally blind. Duffield continues:

These texts call upon us to see, in the broadest sense of the word.

- People get what they deserve (so I am not accountable for their well-being).
- People don't really change (so I'd be naïve to risk giving someone a second chance).
- Certain people are worthy to be heard (so I can ignore those I deem unworthy).
- We know who the worst sinners are (and we aren't them).

God helps those who help themselves. If you work hard enough anyone can make it. God is on my side. Everything happens for a reason. Charity begins at home, etc., etc., etc. [So here's the tough question:] **What are the bedrock assumptions upon which we construct our lives and are we prepared to have them overturned by the One who is the chief cornerstone? [The One who declares, "I am the light."]**

I also want to ask you, how does all this help to lead us from blindness to sight? From darkness to light? From a cup half empty to a cup that overflows? Duffield answers, "If we are to have such a vision, we may have to **be willing to have our lives upended, our assumptions overturned and our sleepy comfort disturbed by the light of Christ** that exposes all we'd hope to hide even as it illumines all we could ever hope to see." The irony found in this biblical story turns the issues of sight and light back on ourselves. Therefore:

- Pay attention (this week and always) to your assumptions: about others, yourself, work, politics, church, money, etc.
- How do you act out of these assumptions? Do they align with the gospel or not? How do you know?
- **Pay attention (this week and always) to who you notice and who you dismiss.**

For once we were blind, but now we see. Amen.