

Seeking: Who Sinned?

The Man Born Blind

John 9:1-17
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
March 19, 2023

On the First Sunday of Lent, I made reference to **harmful theology**. Quoting from the Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman, part of the Lenten resource team from A Sanctified Art, she reflected how, for example, the doctrine of original sin caused harm in her faith journey. She writes, "**Beware of the ways deeply-rooted, harmful theology bubbles up in your life.** In this case, for me it surfaced as thoughts of shame, self-blame, self-distrust, self-deprecation, and self-hatred." In connection with the theme for that Sunday, she continued, "Ask yourself, 'Who will I listen to?' I was giving power to a hermeneutic [method of biblical interpretation] that wasn't even in line with who God has revealed God's self to be, and the image of God that I bear."

I bring this up again today in context of the gospel reading we just heard from John 9. Upon noticing a man who had been born blind, the disciples' first response is to ask, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" **Throughout human history there has been a tendency to attempt to connect tragedies, suffering, and hardships in life with some higher divine cause or purpose.** When things go wrong, many immediately turn to the thought that God is punishing them for some sin they may have committed. This notion, in fact, is built into scripture itself. **Exodus 20:5**, a verse located within the larger context of the Ten Commandments itself, and just one of several similar 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..."

What is your reaction to that? Does that reflect your understanding of the nature and character of God? It does for many, especially among biblical literalists, and even those who hold tight to traditional Christian theology and biblical interpretation. Speaking personally and as a pastor, **I don't believe a word of it! Yet, I believe the biblical author believed it**, reflecting a common theological understanding in their time and place. Still, I don't believe it is a true reflection of the nature and character of God, the Divine Presence beyond, among, and within all creation.

So what, then, does that imply? **These words come from the hearts and minds of humans, not words directly from the mouth of God.** Again, there are many who would vehemently disagree with that assessment. After all, it's right there in black and white on the pages of their Bible. **An adherence to biblical inerrancy forbids any other interpretation. Their conclusion necessarily remains: That's just the kind of God we have – one that judges, condemns, and punishes anyone who sins.**

One of the reasons many of us are 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, and obviously still common, understandings about God. That's why the story we heard today from John 9 is an excellent example.

To repeat, Jesus and his disciples are walking along and they see a man who had been born blind. The first very question asked by Jesus' disciples is, "**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 and God's punishment for someone's sinfulness.** Evidently, this included birth abnormalities like blindness, which itself was considered some form of failure.

Underlying this assumption, again still common today, is that **misfortune is somehow deserved**, that human tragedy and suffering is the result of our or someone else's sin and disobedience to God. If nothing else, it's believed that in some way or another it's all part of God's providence and divine plan. **Accompanying the belief that everything happens for a reason, it becomes our job to connect the dots and figure out why God caused or allowed suffering in order to teach us something. To put it bluntly, that is harmful theology.**

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**. Or, 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, and it still crosses my mind, 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 God as punishment for sin. What Jesus ultimately reveals is that **God is not the cause and author of our suffering, including tragedies, let alone natural disasters, to which many still claim are punishment by God. Instead, when we do suffer, and we all do, God's love and grace can somehow be revealed and made manifest in and through that adversity.** This was certainly the case through the man who was born blind.

An important caveat 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**. This can come in the form of spiritual, emotional, and at times, physical suffering. Our harmful sinful attitudes and behaviors, including forms of abuse directed towards ourselves or others, may indeed cause suffering. But saying that, it must be stated not all suffering in life is the direct result of sin. This is an important distinction. **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 the judgment, condemnation, and punishment by God.**

With the skill of a master literary craftsman, the author of the Gospel of John also fills his story with deep irony. Jesus heals a man who is physically born blind while all those around him, especially the Pharisees, are in the dark because they cannot "see" the truth. They are **spiritually blind**. 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... 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.**

Yes, **sometimes we need to analyze and reevaluate our own assumptions, and perhaps, start over.** Resource biblical commentator, the Rev. Bruce Reyes-Chow, analyses the story from John 9 this way.

We want to believe that people should be held accountable for their actions; generally speaking this is not a terrible thing for society, but in this case, we are talking about a human's personhood and the assumptions made about the person. The disciples' first reaction is to debate the blindness and not deal at all with the human. Intellectualizing and theologizing outside of seeing the created being right in front of them led them to ask the wrong questions. **Rather than ask, "How can we heal and help?" they ask, "Whose fault is it?"**

We do the same thing today when suffering, pain, and affliction are revealed right before us. Empathetic inquiry is set aside and we rush to diagnosis and treatment before we even know the nature and depth of the problem we are trying to address . . . or if it is a problem at all. **We too easily view one another through a one-dimensional lens so much so that all we can do is start down a path toward misplaced questions and actions based on mistaken assumptions...**

We turn genuine struggles of the human condition into solvable formulas of cause and effect, which then gets warped into the idea that if something bad is happening to us, it is because God has determined that we deserve it...

Again, it is not a difficult leap for today's application:

- "We know people are poor because..."
- "We know people are incarcerated because..."
- "We know people are sick because..."
- "We know...We know...We know..."

The truth is, we don't know, but the hope is that we could know more if only we would take the time to ask better questions.

So here's one. **Are there people we, you and I, write off as deserving of their fate? For the gospel writer, the biggest issue here isn't sinfulness, but rather spiritual blindness.** And it is his belief, and I believe ours, that spiritual blindness was **a state of being that can be overcome with God's help.**

God is not the cause of our brokenness, nor the arbiter of punishment for our sins. Instead, remember God is always *with you, within you, and for you.* **Sometimes the problem is spiritual blindness. When that is the case, "Who sinned?", even if directed toward oneself, is the wrong question.**

Amen.

Primary Resource:

"Seeking: Honest Questions for Deeper Faith", A Sanctified Art Sermon Planning Guide, 2023.