

LENT FOUR, YEAR A, MARCH 19, 2023

Two people get into a car accident and they start arguing over whose fault the wreck was. Or you are doing dishes in the kitchen when a baseball flies through the window with a crash. You look out the window and see two boys; one holds a baseball bat; the other wears a glove. All of a sudden they both begin to shout, pointing at the other. You realize they are waiting for you to decide: Whose fault is it?

You hear about some old friends getting a divorce. What happened? Someone must have done something wrong. There is that question again: Whose fault is it, that this marriage didn't last?

Maybe it's human instinct to find fault. We want to be able to explain things, to make sense of things, and if we know whose fault it is, at least we have a way to understand what has happened. Of course, we also like to be able to put the responsibility squarely on somebody else's shoulders.

In our gospel today, the disciples want to know why this man is blind. Is it because of his sin, or his parents' sin? It sounds like an odd question to us, until we stop and think about the kind of blaming we hear all the time. There are prominent religious people who love to speak out and explain that a tragedy, whether it's a hurricane, earthquake, tornado, even war is God's judgment on the sins of a nation, or the sins of a particular group.

It's not just catastrophic events either. It happens with individual circumstances too. A young person gets in trouble and we quickly focus on judging the person's character. Or we may judge the parents for their lack of guidance and discipline. I could go on and on, as finding fault is kind of a national pastime. And it seems that it has always been this way.

In this story it's a fair question for the disciples to ask whose fault is it that the man is blind, given the way people thought about things in that day. Most believed that blindness or sickness was a result of sin. They couldn't imagine a physical cause for sickness and disability. They already had an answer-- sin!

It was simple, as far as they were concerned. Something goes wrong in a person's life, that means that somebody did something wrong. Deep down inside, we cling to that same belief. It comes to the surface when we suffer. In those moments of frustration, when we cry, "What have I done to deserve this?" In those dark moments, when we search our lives: "I must have done something wrong." In desperate moments, when we pray, "If you take this away, God, I'll do something good."

Deep down inside, we're as stuck in cause-and-effect thinking as Jesus' friends were. They were only reflecting what they had been taught in their faith. We know better, not just scientifically, but theologically, don't we? But when we're shaken by things that happen to us or are beyond our understanding, the oldest, simplest answers seem the best. The "whys" that our anguished souls pour out to God in times of tragedy are fundamentally an attempt to understand the uncertainties of life. Those "whys" represent our attempt to get some control. As if knowing why things happen will make us feel better. The disciples were doing that to the blind man. If I know why God made you blind - in other words if I know what someone did to deserve this - then I will know what not to do so it won't happen to me and I can feel more in control.

The disciples asked, "Was it because he or his parents sinned?" Jesus answered, "Neither." He knows that suffering is not some arbitrary punishment meted out by a so-called vindictive God. It is simply part and parcel of life. Life happens. It happens to good people and to bad. We are in trouble, it seems to me, when we talk in terms of "God did this to you because...". And if we make God the author of our misfortune how then will we turn to God for comfort and strength?

Jesus' response is to whose fault is it is that no one is the cause of this. Jesus is saying, "This is the wrong question. The question is not, 'Who sinned?' The question is, given that this is the situation, how are we to join in with God with what God wants us to do?" Moving from laying blame and fault-finding to asking, "How does God want us to act?" is a pretty good model.

Now, don't get me wrong, it is not that no one is ever at fault – often, someone is at fault. Usually, there is plenty of fault to spread around. But so often, this is not a helpful question. Asking who is to blame can sidetrack us from more important questions. It can keep us from engaging with the work God may want to do through us. We are on much safer ground when we say "by God's grace through this event I learned, or I saw, or I experienced..." Jesus moved from focusing on fault to focusing on God's work and healing. In the story Jesus then spits on the ground, makes mud, and puts it on the man's eyes, telling him to go and wash in the Pool of Siloam.

The man does as Jesus asks and washes his face and he sees. Soon the town was buzzing. Everybody was talking about it. But some apparently had trouble believing it. Some said it wasn't really him – it just looked like him. Some said that he had never really been blind to start with. This man was a sinner in their eyes and the moral authorities, were bothered, even angered, that he had been healed. It was unbelievable to them that a blind beggar, nameless, not worth a thought, could have been so blessed by God.

The problem is they don't know how to see him without his disability which in their belief has been caused by sin. To do so would be to recognize their common humanity and kinship. And that would be intolerable. So, of course, when the man shows up at the Temple healed and whole, the community rallies to discredit him. They need to restore order, re-establish the social hierarchy, and reinforce the status quo.

But why? Why does the community feel such an urgent need to silence the healed man? I think the core reason is fear. A fear so primal and so deep, it drives away all compassion, empathy, tenderness, and a sense of kinship. If the man's blindness isn't a punishment for sin, then what does that mean about how the world works? Anyone might get sick, or suffer from a disability, or face years of undeserved pain and suffering for no discernible reason whatsoever. That wouldn't be fair — would it? That would be a version of reality the good religious folks couldn't control. That's what blaming illness or infirmity on sin is all about – control of who they believe is blessed or cursed by God.

Not only does the community's legalistic approach to faith prevent them from seeing the healed man; it also prevents them from seeing God's love and power at work in their midst. No one in the story rejoices when the man is healed. No one – not even the man's parents — expresses joy, or wonder, or gratitude, or awe. No one says, "I am so happy for you!" or asks, "What is it like to see for the first time? Does the sunlight hurt your eyes? What are you excited to look at first?"

Instead, the community responds with contempt, its need to preserve its own sense of righteousness is more important than celebrating a fellow human being's restoration.

The irony in this story is that the Gospels tell us that Jesus's true identity eluded just about everyone until after his Resurrection. Even his disciples struggled to understand who and what their Teacher is. Most of the people who encounter Jesus are too busy seeing what they want to see — a magician, a heretic, a political and military leader, a carpenter's son, a wise man, a phony, a clerical threat. The blind man alone sees Jesus as the Son of Man and calls him, "Lord." We might say, then, that this is one of the rare moments in the Gospels when Jesus himself is truly seen. This suggests to me that vulnerability, curiosity, and openness are essential to real seeing. Who are the people we might render invisible with our cherished theologies, our dogmatic political views, our legalistic approaches to justice, fairness, generosity, and sympathy? Who might we deem expendable?

Will we have eyes to see God in our neighbors, regardless of whether they are sick or healthy, insured or uninsured, citizen or foreigner, protected or vulnerable? Will we be brave enough to look at our own vulnerability, our own mortality and trust that God is with us even in death? Or will we yield to cynicism, panic, and despair?

In a sense, we have to choose to see. We have to want to open our eyes. We have to make a decision that we will look for opportunities to join God's work among us rather than looking to blame and criticize and diminish others.

Jesus healed the man born blind. And Jesus can heal us of our blindness, blindness that does not see God at work. Jesus comes to correct our muddied, blurred, sight and says to us, open your eyes! See what I see, what God sees, and let it move you to your core and change your whole life. May we open our eyes and recognize that we are all created in God's image. Amen