

REVEALING CIRCUMSTANCES

Sermon, March 26, 2017

Texts: John 9:1-12; Ephesians 5:8-17

It was first century Greek Stoic philosopher Epictetus who was first credited with saying, *"Circumstances don't make a person; they reveal a person."* Sometimes people tend to think that circumstances "make" a person, and if only circumstances had been different, we'd have been richer/smarter/wiser/etc. However, we can't control circumstances; there is so much that happens over which we have no control. We do have some degree of control, however, over how we will respond in the midst of the circumstances. Epictetus and others affirm circumstances don't MAKE us so much as they REVEAL who or what we already are. As any engineer will tell you, any structure that lacks integrity is unstable. A bridge or skyscraper that has structural integrity simply does what it was built to do ... it may not be necessarily perfect, it could have flaws; however, under circumstances of pressure and repeated use, a structure with integrity does what it was built to do. If, on the other hand, a bridge or building doesn't have structural integrity, well, "circumstances" will reveal that and the structure will fail. *"Circumstances don't make a person; they reveal a person."* Another related quote of Epictetus: *"First say to yourself what you would be; and then do what you have to do."* In other words, first determine who and/or what you would be, make up your mind ahead of time who you are, and then do what you have to do ... in the midst of your circumstances.

In today's Gospel text (*the lectionary assigned the whole of chapter nine for this fourth Sunday in Lent; however, time will only allow a look at these first verses*), Jesus and His disciples pass a man who was born blind. The disciples ask Jesus a question that many ask when faced with suffering, difficulty, and human tragedy ... they ask, in so many words, *"Whose fault is it? Who is to blame?"* Specifically, they asked, *"Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"* Note what was *not* asked. The question was not, *"Did somebody sin?"* Nor was the question even, *"Rabbi, why are babies born blind?"* They assume they know the answer to those questions. This happened because of someone's sin, of course. Someone must be to blame. It seems the only question here, according to the text, is, *"Who sinned? Who is to blame? This man, or his parents?"*

Now, on one hand, it's not a totally baseless question to ask. Sin and suffering are always related; there are very real (*and often destructive*) consequences to our sinful activity ... nobody really "gets away" with anything. In fact, that's why we do what we can to get people to refrain from sinning; we don't want people to get hurt. I sincerely believe all sin results in some sort of suffering; however, not all suffering is a result of someone's sin. The question raised by the disciples is a question we are all so quick to ask. Someone has a car accident, and we wonder *"Who was at fault? Was he drinking? Speeding? Not paying attention?"* Something happens to a child, and the first thing that crosses our minds is, *"Whose fault was it? Where were the parents? Was nobody watching?"* Someone is diagnosed with a terrible disease, and we raise questions about the person's personal habits, diet, or lifestyle. But the reality is that in spite of our most conscientious efforts, bad things still happen! So many circumstances are beyond our control. Things often happen that are just out of our control. We cannot always control illnesses, no matter how careful we are. Every conscientious parent knows you cannot watch a child every second; even if you are one of those "helicopter parents" who constantly hovers around the child every moment things can happen so, so quickly. You can't always avoid being the victim of a crime, or the victim of abuse, or even the victim of a broken marriage. Again, bad things happen. And we can dissipate a whole lot of energy and time trying to assign blame in a world that has all kinds of dark suffering in it.

We are so quick to ask, *"Whose fault is this? Who's responsible?"* After all, for everything that is wrong there has to be a reason, right? We want to believe that for every effect there has to be a cause. We want to believe, *"As long as I don't make mistakes, then I'll be OK. As long as I don't foul up, I will be blameless, and nothing bad will happen to me. And as long as I don't sin, then I'm ... good."* If we are consistent with this line of reasoning, then goodness becomes a matter of what we don't do. So if we don't **do** anything, then we must be good. I hope I don't have to point out the absurdity of that thinking ... goodness is so much more than just not doing something, goodness also involves doing. Goodness is not just about what we don't do, it's very much about what we **DO** do! Sure, if we don't do anything, then we don't risk getting hurt, we don't risk getting misunderstood, we don't risk being wrong, we don't risk ... anything! Then, it's only a short step to *"everything wrong must be someone else's fault,"* because, well, we didn't do anything; we're "good." No! That's not how it works.

Now, I don't want to make light of the fact that sometimes people have done or said things to us that have helped cause some dark things to happen. But our primary motivation shouldn't be so much to look for someone to blame as it should be for good people to find out how to **DO** something to brighten up the darkness! In this passage, one thing Jesus is not interested in is looking for whom to blame. What Jesus, the Light of the World, wants to do in such situations is to do what He can to dispel the darkness with some light.

Jesus answered His disciples, *"Neither this man nor his parents sinned."* Period. In other words, *"No, this fellow isn't being punished for his sin. I mean, look, he was born blind ... how many things can you do wrong before you are born? Kick your mother too hard*

while you are in the womb? And neither has this man suffered because of something his parents did wrong. No, God isn't 'getting them' by 'getting him.' Neither this man nor his parents have sinned." And we read this and think, "So far so good." But in our pew Bibles, Jesus continues: "... but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life." Now, what does *that* mean? Some people read this and actually think Jesus is saying, "No, he isn't blind because it's his fault or his parents fault. He is blind because God knew that someday I'd need a poor klutz to heal in order to demonstrate God's power!" With this interpretation, this human need to find cause is then met ... of course, this is God's fault! I don't think I have to tell you that interpretation of Jesus' words is really twisted, if not downright insidious. When we've looked at this passage in years past, I told you about my good friend (and best man in my wedding) who is an ophthalmologist with a successful practice in Bethlehem, PA. Rob is a good, generous, conscientious and skilled doctor who takes great delight in performing surgery which enables people to have clearer vision. I think the world of Rob. I *wouldn't* think much of him, though, if he poked a newborn baby in the eyes in order to have an opportunity to show off his surgical skills years later when that baby reached adulthood! Who could worship a God who blinded even one innocent baby, condemning him to years of blindness, all for the sake of having a subject for a "show-n-tell" miracle-working demonstration of Jesus? I don't think that is what Jesus is teaching here!

As mentioned during the Gospel reading, Verse 3 can be better translated this way: *"Neither this man nor his parents sinned. Period. But that the work of God might be revealed in him, we must do the work of Him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work."* (the words "this happened" just do not appear in the Greek, and there is no punctuation in the original, either ... translators inserted the periods and commas.). So, in this (warranted) translation, Jesus gives a short answer to the disciples' question: *"Neither this man nor his parents sinned."* Period. End of answer. Then, He goes on to direct them in what they should do when faced with human difficulty and dark circumstances: *"So that the work of God might be revealed in such situations, well, let's get to work ... time's a wastin'!"* In other words, when faced with difficult circumstances, stop wasting time and energy trying to figure out who or what is to blame and just seize the opportunity to do the work of God so something of God's grace and love and light can be revealed in the midst of the circumstances!

Jesus then spits on the ground, makes some mud, puts the mud on the blind man's eyes, and without any word of explanation, He says, *"Now go to the pool of Siloam and wash it off."* And the remarkable thing is that the blind man goes! The Pool of Siloam was about as far as the Crowne Plaza is from here, about ½ mile. The blind man's stumbling trip up Jerusalem's equivalent of Main Avenue is a real venture of faith. Jesus had not even told him he would be healed; He just walks up to the blind man and says, *"Here's mud in your eye, now go wash it off."* (By the way, some sources say this may be the origin of that toast, *"Here's mud in your eye."* It's another way of saying, *"To your health."* The saying probably arose in a time when the general public was more biblically literate; people would have known this story from John 9. When you raise the glass and say, *"Here's mud in your eye"*, you are toasting the person's health, inferring *"may this drink be a cure for whatever ails you."*)

The blind man now has a choice to make. Will he say, *"Hey, what are you doing?"* and wipe the mud off his eyes with his hands? Or, will he respond by grumbling, *"Thanks a lot, Rabbi. Your disciples ask 'why' and all you do is just muddy the issue further."* No, the blind man goes! It is significant his sight is restored *after* his act of obedience; he obeys before he even knows anything at all about Jesus. Jesus takes the gracious initiative; and the man responds in obedience to the grace even though he literally can't see how it is all going to work out. There is a principle at work here: When faith responds to grace, when faith and grace work together, the consistent result is that we see the world differently. When we do what Jesus tells us to do, the consistent result is that things do get brighter. When Jesus calls us to do something, just do it! Don't put off action by asking "why" or "how" or "what for." The response of faith to the initiative of Jesus in the midst of our circumstances always reveals more light.

Why. We always want to know why. The funny thing, though, is that throughout the Bible, whenever the question of human suffering is addressed, we are rarely given a direct answer to the "why" question. If the Bible never really says "why," we shouldn't be so quick with our unsatisfactory speculations. All the pieces of the puzzle are just not within our finite grasp. Quite often the disciples of Jesus just don't know "why"... at least not in this life. Jesus simply directs His followers to look on the circumstances, whatever they are, as an opportunity ... an opportunity to get to work on behalf of the Light of the World and make the world brighter. Epictetus: *"First say to yourself what you would be; and then do what you have to do."* Say to yourself, *"I am a Christian,"* or *"I would be a Christian"* and do what you should do in the midst of the circumstances whatever they may be! Goodness is not primarily about what we don't do, it's about what we DO do. Jesus directs His disciples to see difficult circumstances as an opportunity to bring light, to DO something and not to do nothing, not to waste time in fruitless speculation or even despair asking why, why, why. We are where we are, when we are, how we are, in the midst of how it is, to do the work of the One who placed us here.

As Paul admonishes in Ephesians 5:16, let us make the most of every opportunity. Take advantage of every opportunity; pray that God will concentrate our minds and energy every moment so that we may seize opportunities and not miss the divine moments due to our preoccupation with things that really do not matter! May we stop looking for some one or some thing or some God to blame, and start seeing the opportunities we have to bring God's love and light and healing in the here and now.