

SENT TO SEE
Sermon, March 19, 2023
Texts: John 9:1-7; Ephesians 5:8-17

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. I heartily recommend you read the entire chapter sometime today; it is a delightful story in its entirety*), 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 want to do what we can to get people to refrain from sinning; we don't want people to get hurt. I do 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. "Who was at fault? Whose fault was it? But the reality is that in spite of our most conscientious efforts, bad things still happen! So many circumstances are beyond our control. It was first century Greek Stoic philosopher Epictetus who was first credited with saying, "Circumstances don't make a person; they reveal a person." 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. You may remember the 10-90 principle I've cited more than a few times over the years: 10% of life is made up of what happens to us. 90% of life is decided by how we react. We really have no control over 10% of what happens to us. But we do have a measure of control over how we will respond, and how we respond can have a profound effect over everything else that follows. 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.

Like the disciples here, we can be 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. I'll be OK. 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, and we'll be OK. 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." 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?

(The following was edited out on the spot due to time constraints; I include it here) 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 ... "Oh, 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 who is an ophthalmologist with a successful practice in Bethlehem, PA; Rob is about to retire in two weeks after 40 years in the practice. He is a good, generous, conscientious and skilled doctor who took great delight in enabling people to have clearer vision throughout his career. I think the world of Rob. I wouldn't think much of him, though, if he had 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? No, I don't think that is what Jesus is teaching here!

Verse three *might* 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 later 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 in the day we have and do what we can to make things brighter and better!" In other words, when faced with difficult circumstances, don't waste time and energy trying to figure out who or what is to blame and just seize the opportunity to do the work of God as best you are able 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 (which, John tells us, means "Sent", hence the pun in the sermon title) was about as far as the Crowne Plaza is from here, about a half 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 right there on the spot? 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! Jesus takes the gracious initiative; and the man responds in faith; he responds in obedience to the grace even though he literally can't see how it is all going to work out. According to the text, Jesus had not even told the man he would be healed; He just commanded him to go wash! (He doesn't even say, "Come back and SEE me later!") It is significant that the man's sight is restored *after* his act of obedience, and that he obeys before he even knows anything at all about Jesus. I'm told that in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, it is believed that here Jesus takes dust and literally creates a new pair of eyes for this man, just as God formed man from the dust of the earth in creation. This new creation was fully realized in the ordained sacrament of washing with water, thus transforming this mud into new eyes through water and the Word. Whether that actually happened I don't know, but this account IS a good theological object lesson of grace. When faith responds to grace, when faith and grace work together, when we faithfully do what Jesus graciously tells us to do, the consistent result is that things do get brighter; we see the world differently. When Jesus calls us to do something, just do it! The response of faith to the initiative of Jesus in the midst of our circumstances always reveals more light.

I believe 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 and better. What Jesus wants to do is work to bring light, because He is the Light of the World. In Matthew 5, Jesus calls His disciples to also be the light of the world, and here directs His disciples to look on difficulty as an opportunity for them to bring light, to get to work and DO something, not to do nothing.

Epictetus' second quote: "First say to yourself what you would be; and then do what you have to do." Say to yourself, "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. See difficult circumstances as an opportunity to bring light, to DO something to make things better, not to waste time in fruitless speculation or even despair asking who is to blame here. We are where we are, when we are, how we are, in the midst of how it is, to do the work of the Light of the World Who placed us here.

As Paul encourages in Ephesians 5:16, let us make the most of every opportunity. to bring God's light and love and healing in the day that we have.