

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

"The Man Born Blind"

Scripture: John 9:1-41, Psalm 27:1-4

Hymns: Oh for a thousand tongues to sing 374 tune: Azmon, We are marching/Siyahamba (English/French/English) 639,
Be thou my vision 461 (vs 1,2,4), Open the eyes of my heart, Amazing Grace (my chains are gone), Open my eyes, that I
may see 500

February 11, 2018

Rev. Steve Filyk

Thank you Brennan and Miranda

For reading today's lesson.

It's a long lesson.

Now you can all breath a sign of relief,

I'm not going to preach on all of it...

I just wanted you to hear the entire story.

It's a fascinating story full of delicious ironies

And playful metaphors of blindness and sight.

A man, blind from birth, is healed by Jesus on the Sabbath.

He is taken to the religious leaders, possibly to verify the healing.

They question whether the healing is from God

For the healing has violated their rules about the Sabbath.

Now it is good to keep in mind that back then, as now,

miracles are not an infallible guide to authority.

While Moses' rod could become a snake

So could the rods of Pharaoh's magicians.ⁱ

It is also good to keep in mind that back then, as now

We test what we encounter with God's revelation.

We judge what we see

with what we already know about God's character.

The Pharisees, for their part,
Find themselves in a conundrum.

They are given good proof of an astonishing miracle.
And yet that miracle-worker
Has violated their tight and tidy interpretation of the law.

For their part,
they seem to be afflicted by a lack of imagination and insight.
They can't imagine thinking of the Sabbath
As a day to do good.

And so to disprove the miracle,
they questioned the man's former blindness.
When they cannot refute him
They curse him for being blind in the first place.

Jesus then seeks out the healed, but now outcast man
And reveals his identity to him.
The man accepts Jesus word and worships him.

But the religious leaders remain blind.
They believe that Jesus is to be judged by their law
Rather than come to fulfill it.ⁱⁱ

It is an interesting story.
Lots of delicious ironies and playful metaphors.
We could spend a few weeks probing this passage.

But for today I simply would like to focus
On the first section that talks about sin
And describes the healing.

PAUSE

Today's passage takes us into the ancient world of Jesus
Where people tended to make direct connections
between actions and consequences.

As Jesus' disciples stumble upon the blind man
they asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned,
this man or his parents,
that he was born blind?"ⁱⁱⁱ

Ever hear someone make a connection
between someone's ill health
And the state of their relationship with God?

While we are maybe less inclined to cast judgement
I can still remember a friend explaining why her mother
stopped going to church:

The pastor declared that the migraines her mother was experiencing
was the result of unconfessed sin.

Now we are maybe less inclined to cast a 'spiritual' judgment,
But we still tend to see the world in terms of
Cause and effect and action and consequences

We hear about the co-worker

Who is recovering in hospital after a stroke.

And we immediately think of all the times we've seen him
Huddling outdoors, dragging on a cigarette.

Looking at this world in this way

Is often a comfortable and complementary way of seeing things,
Especially when we are healthy and wealthy.

They are getting what they deserve,

While we are reaping the benefits
of our wisdom and hard work.

Now "that a specific illness or experience of suffering

Can be the direct consequence of a specific sin, few would deny.

[But that this] is invariably so,

[that this is always the case]
numerous biblical texts deny.^{iv}

Just read the book of Job.

Are Job's calamity's the result of his failures?

His friends think so, yet God vindicates him.^v

And then consider today's reading.

When Jesus' disciples see a blind man

They assume that someone did something wrong.

Jesus told them, "You're asking the wrong question.

You're looking for someone to blame.

There is no such cause-effect here.

Look instead for what God can do.”^{vi}

Or as our pew Bibles put it:

“...this happened so that the works of God
might be displayed in him”.^{vii}

Jesus doesn't play the blame game

But speaks of the man's condition as an opportunity.

An interesting way to see disability...

An opportunity for God's glory?

Well how does disability create an opportunity for God?

One thing you might notice in that blind man

Is an astonishing openness to others.

The story tells us that Jesus approaches the man

And puts a mud pack on his eyes...

And that the man let him!

What would you do if someone tried to put a mud pie on your face?

You'd probably punch them.

Or at least run away.

But this man lets a complete stranger into the middle of his affliction.

He allows Jesus to touch those non-functioning organs

And then follows Jesus' direction about just where to wash.

Contrast this with the 'openness' of the Pharisees.

These whole and healthy people

have no room for any strangers with their unexpected gifts.

Their world is closed to the outsider.

They aren't open to anything new.

The blind man's disability is an opportunity for God.

His disability has cultivated an openness to others.

But there's more...

The blind man's disability creates an opportunity for God

By providing an occasion for compassion and service.

Can you imagine the blind man's morning routine?

In ancient Palestine?

Simple getting washed and dressed

And finding some breakfast

Must have required incredible effort.

But then think of how many opportunities his life

Created for those around him to learn about service,

And grow in their love for their neighbor...

Sure there would be many who would ignore him.

Even the disciples overlooked his need,

And simply saw him as an opportunity

For theological reflection.

But when Jesus came along
He saw the need and opportunity
To share that life-giving power that was in him.

The man provided an opportunity for Jesus to work
And teach the disciples to do the same.

That man's disability cultivated
Opportunities for others to serve.

But I still think there is more...

The blind man's disability also created an opportunity
For faith to take root.

Most of us read the story and think the climax
Is at the beginning where Jesus unconventionally
Heals the blind man.

Yet as we've encountered in our last few stories
In this Gospel the encounters with Jesus
Are about the journey towards faith.

At the beginning of the story
Jesus approaches the man
And then sends him away to wash up.

All the man knows about Jesus
Is contained in that encounter,
And that fact that he was healed.

But Jesus doesn't leave him in this uncertainty
About the person that had healed him.
Jesus approaches him again.

Jesus asks the blind man if he believes in the Son of Man.
The man says he wants to
but needs more direction.

Jesus says that he is the Son of man.
And then and there the man confesses: "I believe".
And he worships Jesus.

The climax of the story is not the gift of physical sight,
But the spiritual insight
that is displayed in that confession "I believe".

If the blind man's openness to others
Stands in contrast with the close-mindedness of the Pharisees,
The blind man's willingness to believe that Jesus
is more than the man who healed him
Highlights the Pharisees unwillingness to trust
those indisputable things Jesus has done.

So why is he so ready to believe,
While others are so closed to the possibility?

Well I think it had to do with his experience of need
And his experience of God caring for him
(both on a daily basis and in this healing)

Those rich and powerful Pharisees
 Would likely live most of their lives
 Without desperately depending on God
 Or ever truly celebrating God's salvation:
 They had all the power and wealth they craved.

PAUSE

When the disciples see the blind man
 They ask Jesus who sinned.
 "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus,
 "but this happened so that the works of God
 might be displayed in him."^{viii}

This man's disability created an opportunity for openness,
 An opportunity for service
 And an opportunity for faith.

PAUSE

I've shared before a little about my family's health problems.
 My siblings are the poster kids for mental illness.

A few years ago my sister,
 Who has schizophrenia compounded by an eating disorder
 Took an overdose that put her in the hospital.
 She was in a coma for a week.

Afterwards she was sent to the psych ward to recover.

She had spent too many days despairing of life
And there she was,
The closest to death she'd ever been.

But something happened miraculous happened
When on a weekend pass she went to her church.

There in the midst of worship she had an encounter with God:
God's Spirit moved through her body.
All those years of teaching about God's love and call
Finally moved from her head to her heart.

When she checked back into the hospital people couldn't believe
That she was the same person.
That inner transformation
could be seen on the outside.

She was born again!

Now she still has schitzophrenia.
She still struggles with depression.
Her eating disorder comes and goes.

And while we'd both agree that these are NOT gifts,
God has made an opportunity out of these disabilities.

In particular God used sickness
Which put her into hospital
To create in her an opportunity
To open her heart to God

And to be healed in a deeper way.

Maybe you or a loved one

Has a disability that you despise.

You may even believe that you are doubly cursed,

Dealing with an affliction

And believing you are suffering for your sins.

Well Jesus isn't interested in casting blame.

He is looking for opportunity.

So can you see it?

Amen.

ⁱ See D.A. Carson *The Gospel According to John* 368

ⁱⁱ See D.A. Carson *The Gospel According to John* 376

ⁱⁱⁱ John 9:2 NIV

^{iv} D.A. Carson *The Gospel According to John* 361

^v Job 42:7ff

^{vi} John 9:3 MSG

^{vii} John 9:3 NIV

^{viii} John 9:3 NIV