

Whose sin is it anyway?
John 9:1-41 Lent4A
by Judi Geistlinger
First Presbyterian Church, Champaign
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It's pretty easy to look on the disciples and decide they are quite clueless in their question to Jesus today. I mean, who in their right mind would ask **why** someone was born without sight or hearing or a left arm? And to assume that of a man born blind or his parents? Oh my, and then to assign blame? Who sinned? Whose fault is it anyway? I'm a firm believer that God does not make mistakes, that all are created in the wondrous image of God.

A few years ago, I went to an art exhibit at the Illini Union entitled "What She Wore." It was a set of clothing of women who had been sexually assaulted and what they were wearing at the time of the attack. If you watch televised crime dramas like me, you might assume the victim was wearing something suggestive, like maybe a short skirt or plunging neckline. But alas, the gallery walls were full of baggy sweatpants and flannel pjs pants, oversized sweatshirts, and other very ordinary clothes. The exhibit really made clear to me that the question of "What was she wearing?" is not a valid question when talking about a *victim* of a crime. It is victim blaming and shaming.

I think there is a bit of that in our scripture today.

Jesus' disciples, upon encountering a man who was born blind, ask Jesus a simple question. "Who sinned? The man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

Who sinned is not a valid question.

Asking who sinned just is not helpful. Certainly, we do know that Jesus' contemporaries believed that sin was behind certain medical abnormalities. But we know that just is not true.

Sure, Jesus responded that neither the man nor his parents sinned, but rather the man was born blind so that God's works could be revealed in him.

This is a place where I struggle, when I think from the standpoint of a hardship being set upon a person for a Godly purpose. But I am thinking from my own perspective. Certainly, it may be harder for a person who is blind to function in the world, but that does not make the blind person less-than anything.

Author Kate Bowler has a wonderful book entitled, Everything Happens for a reason, and other lies I've loved. It is a memoir by Dr. Bowler, a theology professor at Duke Divinity School and young mother who was diagnosed in her 30s with stage 4 colon cancer. She talks about wrestling with the question of, "why?" Why did this happen to me? Aren't I a good person? Her story takes us through her journey through suffering and treatments and talks of the things that were helpful, all through the lens of faith.

She has a podcast that I follow called Everything Happens. Because doesn't everything really just happen? We don't know why, and frankly I think WHY is perhaps the wrong question.

But don't we do that? Don't we regularly ask **why** there is so much pain; why people, especially good people, get sick or get hurt when it is not their fault? We ask why so many die so young. We wonder why families do not work out the way they should work out. We wonder about a lot of things.

When we look at others with the lens that folks with disabilities or outside what we might view as the norm are somehow not right, or imperfect, less-than, or heaven-forbid sinful because they are different, I believe that says more about us than it does about the other.

One theologian said,

"It's important to realize what Jesus does when he responds to this question. First, he rejects both options. In doing this, Jesus is rejecting all explanatory answers to the question of "Why?"

Instead –Jesus refuses to make sense of this situation by explaining it in terms of either the divine will or human sin.

So, he rejects the explanation that bad things happen because the victims are bad, ...or because people don't have enough faith, or because they don't pray correctly, or whatever explanations folks had come up with before Neither Jesus nor the Christian faith offers any clear, rational, sensible explanation of senseless suffering. Neither Jesus nor the Christian faith gives us answers to the problem in the way we want answers.

Instead, we're left with the brute fact that we live in a world that really isn't fair, a world that is marked by ambiguity and inconsistency, a world that is dangerous. We live in a world where tragedy happens for no apparent reason to folks who absolutely do not deserve it. We will never

understand to our satisfaction, and it doesn't do any good to pretend otherwise."¹

In answer to the question of who sinned, Jesus gets down into the dirt, make some mud.

(*Adamah*- the stuff of God's earliest creative acts- to bring the man born blind into a fullness of being. This now-seeing man demonstrates God's will for Christ in the world...to labor toward its perfected end.²

Jesus took this mud and spread it on the man's eyes, then tells the man born blind to go wash in the pool. This getting into the mud and creating sight out of the dust of the earth, it is a story that sounds familiar for this season of Lent, which started on *Ash Wednesday*, when we got our own dirt smudged on our heads.

God is not afraid of the mess. In fact, I would say we can almost always find God in the middle of the messiness of life. That's where God is needed the most. And God's creative power is most evident.

After creating sight where there was none and revealing light, Jesus then exits, stage right for many verses.

What happens next is the formerly blind man comes back from the pool of Siloam, can now see – with eyes that have been opened, and is met with some upset folks with lots of questions. But again, they are not even close to the right questions.

First the neighbors. The only thing we know changed about this formerly blind man, is that he now has sight. But the neighbors don't recognize him, see him as he is now, nor really believe it is the same man. And they really want to know **how** this all happened. And they want to know where Jesus went. The neighbors see the man, but they don't really see...what happened, the miracle, and certainly not the meaning.

Since a miracle seems to have happened in their very midst, they then take the man to the religious leaders. The Pharisees are very interested in the **how** of it all. But some of them pointed out that it was the Sabbath and proclaim that Jesus

¹ <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/who-sinned-lent-4-a-march-22-2020/>

² <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/living-word/march-26-fourth-sunday-lent>

could not be from God because he did work on the Sabbath, and in fact must himself be a sinner. These leaders of the faith look through the lens of law, and don't see Jesus for who he is.

The Pharisees then turn to the man and ask him for his take on Jesus, "What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened." The formerly blind man merely answers, "He is a prophet."

This is not an acceptable answer to them. They simply do not believe him. They don't believe he had been blind since birth, so they called this grown man's parents for justification and explanation.

The Pharisees call the blind man back in for a second testimony and grill him once again on what happened. They want him to "Give glory to God" and denounce Jesus, since he worked on the Sabbath and is therefore a sinner.

Our formerly blind man appears to get weary of all the questions, and says one simple, factual line we now recognize from Amazing Grace... "I was blind, but now I see."

Again, the Pharisees want to know HOW and WHAT.

He asks why they want to know...so they could be his disciples?

Offended by the question, the Pharisees want none of that and revile the man and say with disgust that the man is a disciple of Jesus, but they are disciples of Moses. They know God spoke to Moses. But they cannot see that God is still at work, in the person of Jesus. They can only see through the lens of law and are blind to the loving work of Jesus. They put more emphasis on rules and not stepping outside the letter of the law, They missed the notion that Sabbath is for humankind to understand our need of rest and to see we are not in control. (or perhaps that is why I need Sabbath.)

Our exasperated, formerly-blind man makes a profound declaration of faith, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing."

It seems that he is the ONLY one who sees clearly.

Rev James Lyle said in his reflection on today's texts in Christian Century,

We like to say that seeing is believing. Yet when Jesus clearly demonstrates the compassionate power of God, we look for reasons not to believe. John invites us to see ourselves in the disciples, neighbors, Pharisees, and parents. We are those who prefer not to see what is right in front of our noses, who would prefer to live in the darkness we know rather than open our eyes to the blinding, brilliant light of God's presence in our midst. Still, the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome it.³

Jesus takes all the deep darkness upon himself to the cross, to open our eyes. This means opening our eyes and our hearts in compassion for those who suffer. But first it means opening our eyes to the presence of Jesus, the Word made flesh, the glory of God shining hard and bright in his death and resurrection. Lyle went on to say:

“Once we see Jesus, we are no longer free to be blind. Those who worship Christ are called to see what is right in front of our eyes: the hungry, the homeless, the displaced, the terrorized, the marginalized. The people of God no longer have the luxury or the capacity to ignore those in need. We cannot trust our own sight. Thankfully, in and through Jesus, we don't have to trust our eyes. We simply have to trust him as he reveals, over and again, the work that God continues to accomplish right in front of us.”⁴

In the messiness of community, this is where Jesus returns to the scene. The man born blind encounters Jesus and makes a declaration of faith in Jesus, and Jesus welcomes him into the fold and explains a bit more in chapter 10 of gospel of John what that means.

The question of whose sin is it, anyway, is addressed with another statement of Jesus from verses 4 and 5, Jesus said to his disciples:

“We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work. ⁵ As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.”” John 9:4-5

This is no royal We...no, it is meant for you and me here. We are called to be present, to reach out and be there when bad things happen, when the marriages

³ <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/living-word/march-26-fourth-sunday-lent>

⁴ <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/living-word/march-26-fourth-sunday-lent>

unravel, when the spouse slips further and further into Alzheimer's, at the sick bed, to bring soup over when our friends cancel plans with us because they are ill.

Listen to that nudge, that sense that someone really SHOULD...and see Jesus in those in our midst.

We are probably not going to get a satisfactory answer to the question of "who sin is it anyway" or why bad things happen to such a good person. Everything happens, my friends.

But friends, don't stay home and wring your hands. Go, serve, sit with those in pain, with those hurting. Pick up the phone and call them; don't just think about them.

James Liggett said in his sermon for today:

"What makes sense out of tragedy is not that we understand it. Instead that God has taken it upon himself, and God is present in it and through it, and that God calls us to love him, and to serve him and find him, in our own pain and that of our brothers and sisters.

We are never alone, never forsaken. God is indeed with us, even and perhaps most at the very heart of the very worst.

This isn't the explanation we ask for; it almost certainly isn't the answer we want.

Still, it's the truth. It's honest.

And it promises that we matter, that our service and care are important.

It promises that we are never alone, never forsaken.

God is indeed with us, even in the very heart of the very worst.

And that, finally, is enough."⁵

⁵ James Liggett, <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/who-sinned-lent-4-a-march-22-2020/>