

The man blind from birth. This is how the central character of our story this morning is referred to both in the text itself and in commentaries and sermons. Like the Samaritan woman at the well last week, this man's name is never mentioned. And yet, the people in his community know him; he's not a stranger. But they have defined him by his blindness and his status as a beggar rather than seeing his whole humanity. The man born blind doesn't even speak for 8 verses. When he does speak, it is to affirm to his neighbors and those who had seen him as a beggar that he is indeed the man who used to sit and beg. A miraculous event takes place – this man who was born with physical blindness is able to see for the first time in his life – but what the people focus is on is not this amazing transformation. Instead they focus on the fact that he is no longer a beggar. Jesus has upset the status quo. This man whom the community had defined as a beggar and a blind man, is suddenly neither and it has turned their understanding of how the world works completely upside down.

Possibly in an effort to make sense out of what has happened, the neighbors take the man to the Pharisees, strict followers of the Jewish law. The Pharisees struggle with a different preconception. Their rigid adherence to Jewish law, which prohibited doing any work on the sabbath, meant that they couldn't fathom that Jesus was a man of God, much less the Messiah since he made mud on the sabbath. After questioning the man and his parents, and then questioning the man again they can't seem to even wonder if maybe they don't have it all figured out. The man born blind doesn't try to argue the law with them or get into a heated theological debate about whether or not making mud or performing a miraculous healing on the sabbath meant that Jesus must be a sinner and therefore not a man of God. Instead he simply tells them what he knows to be true. He says to them, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." But this isn't enough for the Pharisees who still want to reconcile their beliefs with what

has happened. When they can't make it work, they drive them man out of the synagogue saying "You were born entirely in sins, and you are trying to teach us?"

I think this last sentence gives us a clue as to why this transformation was so upsetting and difficult for the people to understand. They had assumed, as did the disciples, that the man's blindness was a result of sin - either his sin or the sin of his parents. When Jesus removes the man's blindness, he not only gives him his sight, he makes visible the despicable way the man has been treated by his community. The people had assumed that he deserved to be blind, but if Jesus gave him sight and in doing so proclaimed that no one's sin caused his condition, then the judgement they leveled against him and his parents was the real sin.

From the time we are toddlers we begin to ask the question "why?". As we get older the why questions become more complex and are often unanswerable. The second verse of our text this morning has the disciples asking why the man is blind. Who's fault is it? And Jesus responds that it is not a result of anyone's sin. But the verses that come next have been argued about and I think it is important to address them briefly.

The original Greek in which the New Testament texts were written did not use punctuation. Most translations have settled on something similar to what Doris read for us in the New Revised Standard Version: "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work." Many scholars, including Dr. Rubel Shelly believe the text would be better translated with a few punctuation changes so that it would read like this: "As [Jesus] walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned that he should be born blind. But so that God's works might be revealed in him, we must work the works of him who sent me while it is

day; night is coming when no one can work.”¹ I tend to agree with Dr. Shelly. I don’t believe Jesus is saying that the man was born blind in order for God’s works to be revealed. I think a truer reading is that Jesus will do God’s work by giving him sight and in doing so God’s work will be revealed. It’s a subtle, but critical difference.

Pastor Eric von Atzigen writes “The key to the confusion in John 9:3 really comes from the fact that the disciples are asking the wrong question. They are wanting to know “Why?” Why is he blind? Why did it happen to him? Why aren’t I blind? Did sin cause this? If so, whose sin?”²

Don’t we ask these same questions? Why do bad things happen to good people? Why is there hurting, hunger, and brokenness in the world?” But Jesus never answers this question. Maybe there is no good answer to this question. When we focus on asking “why?” I wonder if we risk missing the transformative possibility that opens when we ask “what now?” I don’t believe that God causes pain or suffering or blindness or any other difference in ability or any kind of suffering. But this means that there may not be a good answer to “why?” What I do believe is that God is present in these situations and invites us to step into the possibility of what might be next. God seeks us out, just as Jesus sought out the man after the Pharisees drove him out of the synagogue and invites us change our thinking. Our challenge is to let go of the labels and the stigma we have assigned to others and ourselves.

At my home church in Washington state, the congregation was actively involved in supporting a homeless camp that would reside on the property of different churches for 90 days at a time. One of the women, we’ll call her Lisa, who lived at the camp and was a vocal advocate for the camp’s mission, had started attending our church on a somewhat regular basis. Not long after she first came to

¹ <http://www.rubelshelly.com/content.asp?CID=10345>

² <https://mondaymorningreview.wordpress.com/2009/08/31/john-91-5-word-study/>

church, she moved out of camp and into a rented room in a house. From the first time she came to worship, people introduced her to others and Lisa from camp, or Lisa who used to live at camp. She had spent a few months of her 60 years of life living at the homeless camp and yet for the people in that church, it had become her entire identity. Needless to say, even though the people were welcoming and kind, Lisa stopped coming to church. She didn't want to be known as "the woman from camp." She was more than that. Much more. But her difference had become her primary identity in the church and she couldn't seem to do anything that change that.

Too often we define those around us in terms of their shortcomings or perceived deficits or simply their differences. We would never admit to this in polite company of course. But I would bet we are all guilty of doing this from time to time. We categorize people as the one with unruly kids, or the one who's been divorced three times, or the one with all the tattoos, or the one on food stamps, or the alcoholic, the transgender person, the woman who never had kids, the guy who doesn't work, the kid who dropped out of college. The list goes on. And this labeling isn't something we only do to others. We may even do it more to ourselves. We allow something from our past or something about us that we perceive to be a shortcoming to shape with way we see ourselves.

The last two verses of our text this morning takes us back to that question of the disciples, "Who sinned, this man or his parents?" Verses 40 and 41 read "Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, "Surely we are not blind, are we?" 41 Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains." In the words of the Rev. David Lose, "It turns out that sin and blindness do go together. Only it is not blindness of eye but blindness of heart that leaves one in sin."³ The sins in this story are many: blindness of heart as David Lose puts it, but also the sin of certitude, the sin of blame, the sin

³ <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3123>

of brokenness. The man born blind experienced something miraculous. The people in his community and his synagogue should have loved him regardless of his blindness, but even when he is given sight, they continue to reject him. They thought they had him all figured out. He was blind. He was a beggar. That was his identity. But God and Jesus don't work that way. The love and grace of God does not see labels and it certainly isn't restricted by them. Instead of blame and punishment, Jesus sought to bring wholeness and affirmation. We too are called to resist labels, to resist assigning blame, to resist the assumption that people deserve the situation in which they live; and instead we are called to be messengers of God's love and grace, to support people who are experiencing brokenness in some way. Maybe if we assume that we don't see everything clearly, our eyes may be opened in miraculous ways as well.

May it be so. Amen.