

I WAS BLIND, NOW I SEE
John 9:1-41
DRANESVILLE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
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If you're like many people today, you probably have a lot of unanswered questions about our current situation.

What should I (and shouldn't I) do during this crisis?

How long will this last?

What is my level of risk?

Maybe you are wondering where God is in all of this.

One thing I have been wondering is what I might do as a pastor, and simply as a follower of Jesus Christ, to be a non anxious presence to others and live as I hope and believe Jesus would have me live.

In the Gospel Lesson for today, Jesus encountered a man who was born blind. His disciples assumed sin was the cause of his blindness. They asked Jesus, "**Who** sinned to cause this?"

I doubt many of you have associated sin with the current crisis; but I can remember when other calamities (9/11 for example) were attributed by some religious leaders on the fringes to sin and human depravity

That may seem like an odd question in our day, - Who sinned? - but back then rabbis taught that physical ailments were the result of parents' or grandparents' sin OR sin by the sick person committed BEFORE BIRTH!

While there are many people who erroneously believe that today, the Church teaches that we cannot always assume a cause-and-effect relationship between sin and suffering. Are there time when sin leads to suffering of either the one committing the sin or other innocent people? Absolutely; but we certainly cannot say that is true in all cases.

Jesus told his disciples that sin had nothing to do with it in this case. He said the man's blindness would enable the work of God to be displayed in his life. To me, that's tough to grasp. It almost seems cruel on God's part. Maybe this is just one of those times when we need to remember that God is God and we are not. We will never understand all the ways of God. If we could, God would be too small.

To try to put this situation in perspective, let me ask you this: Have you known people who talk about suffering they have experienced and look at it, in hindsight, as a gift? They may say they learned and grew in ways they never would have otherwise. They tell you they appreciate the little

things in life, other people, etc. Somehow their suffering may have drawn them closer to God.

I have personally heard several men who were POWs in Vietnam for several years describe their time in captivity as a blessing. They certainly didn't seek it out; but they learned so much about themselves and grew in ways they never could otherwise. Many spoke of how their faith in God became stronger as a result.

We don't seek suffering, but may receive a blessing from it. In ways we may never understand, God wants to redeem the suffering and have good come out of it.

Jesus didn't say anything to the blind man at first. He simply made mud out of spittle and dirt and applied it to his eyes.

Why would Jesus do that? Is this an action that harkens back to Creation? Is Jesus "Re-creating"? (Remember, the first human was fashioned for the dust of the earth.) One thing we can notice as we look at the various healings Jesus did - no two healings by Jesus were done the same way

In this case, Jesus took the initiative. He approached the man, who had not asked to be healed. After applying the mud, Jesus sent him to the Pool of Siloam (in Jerusalem) to wash his eyes. The word "Siloam" means "sent." There may be some irony here. Jesus was sent by God the Father. As the Father sent Him, so He sends us

Washing alone didn't heal the man; but he may not have been healed had he not washed. The man returned, able to see.

The reaction of his neighbors is noteworthy. They were (obviously) surprised and skeptical. It was understandably hard for them to believe a miracle had happened. They asked the man to explain how it happened.

How could he? How does anyone explain what logically couldn't be? Miracles can't be explained; only described.

Let's consider how the neighbors did respond. There was no joy - only quarreling about his identity - no thanks or praise to God for a blessing that had been given to someone they had known for years.

I am reminded of the reactions I observed when my colleague Kenny Newsome was miraculously healed after a stroke which had left him unable to speak. Many of our clergy peers were skeptical and looked for logical explanations for his healing. Some even questioned if he really had lost the ability to speak in the first place. They wanted a medical explanation - something physicians could not give them.

We often have trouble dealing with situations that don't fit our expectations or understanding. The man was blind and now sees. How

can that be? Kenny was unable to speak, but now he can. What's the LOGICAL explanation?

The neighbors of the formerly blind man took him to the Pharisees - the teachers of the Law. Why? To help them understand? For a more thorough examination? We don't know.

Only at this point do we learn that Jesus had healed the blind man on the Sabbath. In so doing, Jesus violated two laws established by the Pharisees:

1. Kneading the mud was equated to kneading dough to bake bread - something specifically prohibited.
2. Jesus healed the man of a condition which was not life-threatening. The Law required him to wait until the Sabbath was over.

Once again, both of these actions were considered work which was not allowed. Ironically, the Pharisees are more concerned with **when** Jesus healed than the fact that a man born blind can now see.

Some of the Pharisees could not imagine how anyone from God could do such a thing on the Sabbath. He must be a sinner. Others countered by saying that a sinner could not do something like this. Throughout the passage, the Pharisees demonstrate disbelief and prejudice. Many believers today are like the students of the Torah in Jesus' day - so sure of theology and their understanding of Scripture as to be ready to write off those who have different experiences or understanding of Christ.

Next, the Pharisees turned to the man who was healed and ask his opinion. He declares that Jesus is a prophet. He is partially correct. A number of prophets had performed miraculous healings in the Old Testament. BUT restoration of sight is a messianic activity. If the Pharisees were honest, they would have known that and admitted as much. That must have been very troubling for them.

Things were not going well for them. The Pharisees needed more information. They were seeking ways to explain away the healing. "Maybe this man wasn't really blind, let alone blind from birth. Let's check with his parents."

The parents acknowledged the man was their son, was born blind, but had no idea how he was healed. If the Pharisees want more info, they must ask their son, who is old enough to speak for himself. The parents answered in a way that seems to throw their son "under the bus" because they were afraid to be expelled from the synagogue if they said or did

anything to indicate they believed Jesus is the Christ, the Promised Messiah.

Like the man's parents, there are many people today who, if they are honest, are aware of what Jesus is doing in the world, but are too concerned about their social and economic status to witness for him or offer support for those who do.

Having made no progress with the parents, the Pharisees brought the man back in. They commanded him to "Give glory to God;" which is a means of urging the man to tell the truth. They want the man to agree that Jesus is a sinner. (Sometimes those who talk the most about the sins of others are themselves the most spiritually blind and sinful of all.) The man acknowledges that he cannot determine whether Jesus is a sinner or not. He had already testified to what he had experienced. His testimony was very simple: "I was blind...now I see." Of course, we recognize these words as some of the most notable in the hymn, "Amazing Grace."

In a way, this story is about time - before and after. "I **was** blind...**now** I see."

Whether we know it or not, we are all born spiritually blind. Over time, we may come to faith. As followers of Christ, we need to speak of our experiences. We are called and expected to **confess** Jesus rather than try to **explain** Him. In that way we can help others who are born spiritually blind.

When the man was asked again by the Pharisees to tell what Jesus had done and how he did it, his sarcastic reply didn't sit well with the leaders. Nevertheless, they have a dilemma. They know they cannot ignore or explain the healed man; nor can they ignore or explain Jesus' actions.

When the man asks if the leaders wish to become Jesus' disciples TOO (which implies the man has some level of belief in Jesus by this time), he is expelled from the synagogue. The reason given? How can one who was steeped in sin at birth (We're back to the disciples' original concern.) have the audacity to try to teach the leaders?

Remember, the man didn't ask to be healed in the first place! The Pharisees didn't know what to do in this situation. Not to appear flippant, but it may be similar to our leaders dealing with COVID-19. Initially, they tried to use outdated or inappropriate methods. Now they are developing and applying new and different procedures. The Pharisees were unwittingly following the old adage: "If you don't know what to do, you do

what you know.” If someone didn’t conform to the mould, they must be a sinner who should be expelled.

By being expelled from the synagogue, the man who had been healed suffered hardship after being healed. He was officially cut off from all aspects of Jewish society.

Many believers today, after they come to faith in Christ, suffer abuse and persecution from neighbors, family, or government, depending on their circumstances. Embracing Christ in faith may come with consequences - social isolation, unjust punishment, even martyrdom. Salvation through belief in Jesus Christ is free; but discipleship costs everything.

At this point, Jesus found the man and revealed his identity to him. Note how the man has progressed from simply stating Jesus’ name to declaring that Jesus is a prophet. He then declined to declare whether or not Jesus was a sinner. The man had gone on to testify that he had been blind, but now he sees. He said that, if Jesus was not from God, he could do nothing. Finally, when confronted by Jesus for the first time since Jesus put the mud on his eyes, he expressed belief in Jesus and worshiped Him.

His faith had constantly grown. His testimony was genuine. He didn’t need to have all the answers in order to have faith. He simply told how Jesus changed his life. His spiritual sight gradually improved along with his physical sight.

Let’s compare the change in the man who was healed and the Pharisees. Ask yourself, by the end of the passage, who is blind now? I believe the Pharisees became increasingly blind to Jesus and his message as time went by. They were so closed to the idea that Jesus might be the Promised One, the Messiah, that they ignored the obvious. Another possibility is that they may have had an inkling who Jesus was but were reluctant to do anything that would weaken their base of power and influence.

Like the man born blind, we may be stunned recipients of a great gift from God that we don’t fully understand but won’t deny. We continue to move toward a greater understanding of and commitment to God as a result. Like the man born blind, we may gradually come to recognize who Jesus is and what he can mean to each of us.

As I worked on this message, I kept wondering what our blind spots might be. I believe we all have them. My prayer for each of us is that we might have some “spiritual mud” placed on us so that, when it is removed, we might have fresh eyes to see our world and one another as Christ sees them. Amen.