***Giving Up our Puny Ideas about God and What God Wants from Us***

*a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on March 19, 2023 based on John 9:1-3, 6-12, 18-21, 24-25*

“Rabbi,” say the disciples. “who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

Now this is a question not unlike the one that goes: “When did you stop beating your wife?” It backs Jesus into an impossible corner, pressuring him to agree that one or the other choice is the answer.

Jesus’s disciples presume that blindness comes as a result of a person’s wicked behavior. Do you buy that? Of course not. It’s just plain offensive. By twenty-first century standards it’s laughable, except that many religiously conservative people still believe such rot.

At bottom it reveals the values and assumptions of an ancient era when not a few, no, almost *everyone,* believed without question that “sin” was the principle cause of disease and disability. “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents that he got the Corona virus?” Right? Most everyone believed that sin and sickness or misfortune were inextricably linked - everyone but maybe Jesus.

Now, for background, you need to know that the Bible does not speak with one voice. You can often find texts in total opposition.

On this matter, the matter of the cause of a man’s illness, the *Book of Proverbs* in the Hebrew Bible tells us that if you are well and rich it is because God has blessed you. Yes, and if you are poor and sick it’s because you must have sinned. And if you are blind, you must have sinned really big. This is why the disciples ask the question.

But there is also a book in the Hebrew Testament that objects to this understanding and objects to it strenuously. It’s the *Book of Ecclesiastes*. There the writer says, whether you are rich and healthy, or sick and poor is a matter of pure chance. Coronavirus or blindness can happen to anyone.

I love this about the Bible. It is a living library of books, books that often correct one another.

It is the record of a lively debate that has been going on for a several thousand years. Jesus clearly sided with *Ecclesiastes* over *Proverbs.*

He did that for two reasons. First he did that because he had highly developed common sense. He would not allow the conventional wisdom of the day to override what his eyes and heart told him about the world.

Second, he did this because he saw the rich often ganging up on the poor and blaming the poor for their own troubles. The wealthy used the puny theology in *Proverbs* to blame those not as lucky as they are. Jesus knew the human heart so well, and this is part of what made him so unique.

In 2009, Gunnar Cerda, the father of an autistic child, and a pastor in Ohio, wrote an article for *Sojourner’s* magazine entitled “Who Sinned That This Child Was Born Uninsurable?” Interesting title, eh? This was before Obamacare.

Gunnar Cerda knew from his own experience what it was like to be blamed for his child’s disability and to be refused medical coverage because of what is called a pre-existing condition, even a condition pre-existing the child’s birth.

What parent with a disabled child has not wondered what role he or she genetically speaking or theologically speaking, might have had in his or her child’s affliction? It is a terrible question, and one seldom uttered aloud.

Jesus does not buy the presumption of the disciples about sin causing blindness. In response to their question he says the following: “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.”

And then without explaining further what he meant, he proceeded to take some of his spit and some dirt and make mud into a poultice to rub on the man’s eyes. Pretty messy, but there it is.

The scene now changes to the pool Jesus sent him to where a controversy begins. The crowd there questions whether it really is the man born blind or just someone *who looks like him*, so they ask him to explain how it is that he can see; which he does.

But the crowd is not satisfied, and in time, they take the now *sighted* man to the Pharisees who hear his story. They do not like the fact that even though Jesus has done a good thing, he has done it on the Sabbath. And so they surmise that if Jesus is not observant of the Sabbath, this healing cannot be from God. Can you believe it ?

Then they decide that they should call the blind man’s parents as witnesses because the Pharisees still don’t believe that the man was really blind from birth. And at this point you can’t help but feel that this poor, formerly blind, man, is feeling a bit like chopped liver. Nobody is celebrating the fact that he can see. All they want to do is criticize the source of his healing and, by implication, him too.

The Pharisees ask his parents whether he was really born blind or whether he had just been faking it all these years.

Well, the parents are shy folk, frightened by this religious inquisition and terrified to be testifying even on their own son’s behalf. So they throw the ball back to the son, saying that he can speak for himself -- throwing him under the bus!

The blind son is called to testify again and the Pharisees start out by telling him that the one who healed him must surely be a sinner, so he better fess up to the truth about his healing. To which the blind man says, “Look I don’t know whether he is a sinner or not. But one thing I do know. Once I was blind; but now I see.”

It’s such a beautiful statement. It’s so resonant, it shows up later in hymns.

The Pharisees are infuriated because they cannot get him to say what they want, so in disgust, they throw him out on the street, and in the final scene, in a conversation with Jesus, Jesus tells the man that he can now see at two levels.

Not only has ocular sight been provided to him, but now he also sees with the eyes of faith. So, there are two levels of healing at issue here. Physical and spiritual.

For Jesus the easier of the two is the man’s physical sight. The more difficult matter is healing the theological blindness of the Pharisees, and the crowd, and even his own disciples. This is the reason that John tells us this story.

What Jesus and the gospel writer want to do is to get our eyes opened to a reality that is right in front of us. They would like us to change our focus and not worry so much about sin and whose sin caused what, but rather notice where it is that God is breaking into the world.

Now, please don’t misunderstand me here. I’m not saying that someone’s disability exists because hidden within a disability or disease is a blessing in disguise, some silver lining that is the reason we have blindness or deafness or lameness.

Any God who uses human suffering and brokenness to glorify him or herself is nothing less than a capricious narcissist. But Jesus wants us to know that in spite of the presence of human disability and disease, God has not abandoned us; that it is possible to discover in the midst of the challenges of life including illness and disability, that God may be right there transforming our our lives.

Let’s go back to the disciples’ original question: “Who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?”

It is inevitable that we want to make sense of our life’s experiences. We want to know why it is that we suffer the ills that we do. And sometimes in spite of ourselves, we pose the question in terms of blame. But to satisfy yourself with blaming others or God is to blind yourself to what may be deeper and more relevant.

Anna Carter Florence names this harmful fixation of ours by drawing two scenarios -- both of which I am personally familiar with.

First she describes a young couple who sit in the doctor’s office at a fertility clinic waiting for information on what’s going on with them. They have been trying to get pregnant for two years but with no success, and now they want to know why.

The week before they came in for the battery of tests that should give them some answers [Anna says], but as the doctor sees the tension in their faces, how they are unable to look at one another or hold hands, she knows how the couple are framing their questions:

Is my wife the one—is it her inability to conceive? Is my husband the one—is his count too low?  
Is it her organs that are malfunctioning?  
Is it his stress that is interfering?

The doctor opens the folder in front of her and takes a deep breath. The question hangs heavy in the air: Whose fault is it, that we cannot have a baby?

Florence then poses another scenario:

It’s your twenty-fifth high school reunion, and you can’t wait to catch up with your old friends. It’s been years since you were all together. Everyone is there—everyone except Brad and Beth. "Aren’t they coming?" you ask, and your friends shake their heads, silently. "I guess you haven’t heard," says one, breaking the ice; "Brad and Beth are getting a divorce." You sit in stunned silence. "No!" you say; "not Brad and Beth!" Was it an affair? Was it a midlife crisis? Did he hit her? Did she drink?

"What happened?" you whisper, not even sure you want to know the truth. And there is that question again: Whose fault is it that this marriage didn’t last?

I suppose it’s inevitable that we should try to understand the cause of the mysteries and complications of life, whose sin caused this man’s blindness, why there’s a problem getting pregnant, who ruined this marriage – the husband, the wife, or their parents?

But the fact is that Jesus has no time for such questions. He changes the subject and asks us to focus our sights on something deeper; to understand life at a different level than we have understood it before. ***He wants us to look for God in the places where we are looking for blame.***

Let me offer a real life example of how such a window on God and God’s glory can be opened. I saw Itzhak Perlman with our Oregon Symphony a month ago and he’s on my mind.

Some years ago at New York’s Lincoln Center Perlman was ready to take the stage. He is usually the last person in place because though his fingers are amazing, his legs don’t work so well.

He was struck with polio at the age of four. Now he is in a wheelchair but then he depended on crutches. That night at Lincoln Center, Perlman sat down, and placed his Stradivarius violin under his chin.

He was scheduled to play the Brahms Violin Concerto; one of my absolute favorites. Just a short time into it, the sound of a string popping echoed through the hall. Well, protocol permits a musician to call for a pause, hurry off and replace the string. But Perlman waved at the director to go on.

By instinct he transposed the music to three strings instead of the four. He continued to deliver the music with purity and passion. Some minutes later, having finished the first movement he lowered his violin exhausted. The audience sat in stunned silence for some 8 seconds before rising to their feet to cheer.

Then the man with two busted legs and one busted string rose to speak. “All my life,” he said, “it has been my mission to make music from that which remains.“

You witness such a thing and it gives you strength to face your own disabilities, your own set of challenges. It gives you faith again in the resilience of the human spirit, and in a purposeful, redeeming creator.

You can spend your life trying to lay blame and find fault, or you can spend your life doing what you can with what you have,whatever it is, *whatever you find yourself up against,* and by so doing, you glorify your creator.

Let me close with one more reflection from this story.

Note that the blind man was not healed immediately through Jesus’s action with the mud and the saliva. He had to find his way to the pool of Siloam. He had to show himself to a set of religious authorities.

It has been observed by other interpreters of this story that the healing happens *not* where the man meets Jesus, but rather, afterward, on the way to the pool. Healing happens, not all at once, but “on the way.”

It gives one hope that maybe the healings we ourselves need will happen, similarly. Not in dramatic fashion, say, at a faith healing meeting, the floor covered with sawdust, the so-called healer, hitting you on your forehead, the jolt to your head leaving you reeling.

No, maybe the healing takes its own sweet time, and in the interval we do a little bit of growing, and a deeper healing has time to take place, take root, make a difference in who we are, and how we see this crazy world we find ourselves in.

When I was bitten by ticks and got Lyme disease back in the summer of 2000 I tried antibiotic after antibiotic – I prayed for a healing and I only got worse.

Over six years of struggling later, having gone down many avenues, becoming my own doctor because no one could really help me, I found my own complex method of treatment which finally knocked it down, and eventually, years later, knock it out.

The first six years were mostly wandering in a wilderness. Now, looking back, I wonder if anything else in my life made a more profound difference in making me who I am today. I can’t think of another thing.

Like those who witnessed the healing of the blind man – I had to let go of some things I thought I knew about being sick and being well, in order to embrace a whole new way of understanding what those two states of being mean, and don’t mean.

Maybe you’ve walked a similar path.

This whole world of ours is in a wilderness period now.

I wonder how we might find healing going forward? For the whole planet?

What healing might we be on our way to?

How might we see differently once we get there?

Amen