

John 9:1-41 “Take Your Shades Off”

This is a great story. I can't hear this story without the song “Amazing Grace” spinning around in my head. For those of you who are working through John in Bible study, you've got all sorts of “John-isms” at work in this passage. First of all, it's a *long* story. The stories about Jesus' healings and encounters with people in John are the longest of the four gospels. Then you've got the theme of light and darkness in the world as well as the idea of spiritual blindness in the leaders of the time. But when you get right down to it, this entire 41 verse section is dealing with a single question that the disciples asked Jesus when they were walking along the road and saw a blind man. “Teacher, who sinned? This man or his parents that he was born blind?” Which, we look at this now and say, “That's a silly question. If the guy was *born* blind, it couldn't be *his* fault. This is the 21st Century ... we know that sometimes people are born blind for no reason!” But that was the conventional wisdom at the time. “When bad things happen to people, it's because they've done something bad themselves.” Somehow this man's blindness is because of something he or his parents had done.

Jesus puts that notion to rest quickly. “No it's not about anybody's sin, this is about God transforming this man.” God didn't cause this person to be blind to punish anybody. Jesus wants his disciples to get that notion out of their minds right away. And yet, throughout the history of the church we, who are supposed to be Jesus' followers, won't let go of it! “No, that's not the way it works, and that's not what Jesus was saying. Everyone knows that bad stuff doesn't happen without a reason!” Yeah, but Jesus just said ... “Oh, don't give me that ‘Jesus said' nonsense, we know that there's someone or something to blame when bad things happen!” Think I'm kidding? How many times do you hear preachers on TV say, “Well, the reason that tornado ripped through that little town is because they elected a gay city council member!” Or, “The reason we're in the middle of a 7-year drought is because there's an abortion clinic operating in the area!” So many people think that if a natural disaster happens, it *must* mean that God is punishing someone.

Not only is that bad theology, it's bad *meteorology* too! But it only seems to apply to certain issues and certain cases. When we lived in Virginia, a tornado basically cut a Wal-Mart in half in Williamsburg. But not once did I hear a preacher say, "This was God's punishment on Wal-Mart for not paying their employees a living wage or offering them health benefits."

But this is just part of a bigger problem we have. By nature, we humans have a strong desire to place blame. Think about how many times this has happened in the Bible! You can't even get three pages into the Bible before people are pointing fingers at each other in blame. God tells Adam and Eve to stay away from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Do not ... and I repeat *do not* eat the fruit of that tree." Next thing you know, there they are, eating the fruit from the very tree God told them to stay away from. Then what happened? Adam points the finger at Eve and says, "God, this woman, that I might add YOU gave me *made* me eat it!" Then Eve says, "Oh yeah? Well this serpent, that I might add YOU put in the garden made me do it!" The majority of books in the Bible feature someone blaming someone else for something bad that's happened.

Why do we have such a strong desire to place blame ... especially on individuals? We do this in so many areas of our lives. We do it in our communities. "Who's responsible for so many homeless people living here?" And then we point the finger at one or two people without asking what *systems* are in place that create homelessness in the first place?" Who's responsible for high gas prices? Who's responsible for the opioid crisis? Even when we can answer that question as in the case of PG&E's culpability for the Camp Fire, the bigger, more important question is, "*Why* did PG&E fail?" Then we'd have to deal with big-picture issues like greed and over-consumption and all sort of uncomfortable subjects where we'd have to do some self-examination.

Even now, everyone wants to point the finger and place the blame on someone for the Corona Virus. "It's those bat-eating, dog-eating, snake-

eating, uncivilized Chinese people who are responsible for this!” Oh, you’re exaggerating Pastor. No! A Texas senator ... an elected official in our government said that out loud and on camera four days ago! In our current crisis, I think we need to be on the lookout for the “big picture” lessons we can take from this. We spend so much time blaming and pointing fingers that we fail to engage in healthy self-reflection. Are there things that the World could have done better to prevent this from becoming the global pandemic that it is now? No doubt. But why do we have to think, “Well if I can just find something to blame, somehow that will make me feel better.” We’re comfortable living in “problem mode,” but we have a hard time shifting over to living in the solution.

Back to the story of the blind man receiving sight. Funny how this story progresses. Remember it starts out with a question about who is to blame. The disciples say, “Whose fault is it that this man is blind?” Jesus said, “This man’s blindness is not his fault. But watch ... I’m going to turn this into a lesson about God revealing the truth and how God sent me to be the light of the world.” So Jesus heals this guy in a really strange and complicated way compared to other healings he performed. He spits in the dirt, makes some mud, puts it on the guy’s eyes and says, “Go wash the mud off in the community pool.” So he does. And the folks who knew him started asking, “Wait a minute? Isn’t this the blind guy who used to beg on the streets? This couldn’t be him. What happened?” And the guy said, “This *man* Jesus made some mud, put it on my eyes, and told me to wash in the pool of Siloam.” Well where is he? “I don’t know. In fact, technically I don’t even know what the guy looks like!”

So then the Pharisees come to investigate. Why? Because there was a healing on the Sabbath. So they track this guy who received his sight down. “Great,” he thinks, “now I’ve got the religious leaders quizzing me too!” So he tells them about the spit and the mud and the pool, and boom ... he can see! You’d think the Pharisees would be like, “Wow! That’s so cool! This guy can see!” But they’re more concerned that Jesus was healing on the Sabbath! A lot of people wonder about why

Jesus went to all this trouble to spit in the dirt and make mud and send the guy off to wash in a pool when he could have just said, “There! You’re healed!” like he did with so many other people. But no, Jesus went to a lot of *work* to do this. On ... the ... *Sabbath*. “Preacher, are you suggesting Jesus did this just to rile up the Pharisees?!” Maybe. But isn’t that exactly what happened? Then the Pharisees start interrogating the guy again. And he says, “Listen, it’s clear that this Jesus is a prophet.” Does that satisfy the Pharisees? No! Because now they go after the guy’s parents. “Is this your son? Was he blind from birth?” They said, “Yeah. He was! But why are you grilling us? Our son is the one who was healed ... go ask him!” So they ask him again. “Tell us about this man ... he’s a sinner because he did work on the Sabbath!” And finally, out of frustration, he tells these so-called religious leaders who were trying to point the finger and make excuses, “Listen, what do you not understand here? I was blind. Now I see! Isn’t that what’s important?”

What is important for us today? Especially in this crisis we’re facing now? What ... is ... important? To find someone to blame? To find someone to punish? I’m not saying that we shouldn’t hold people accountable for mistakes that were made. I’m just saying we need to spend a whole lot *more* time figuring out what we can do *now*. We’re going to have to start finding new ways to “do” church. Church is not the building, church is the people. How can we as the people of God continue to do the work of Christ in the world when we’re not supposed to gather together in large groups for ... how much longer that’s going to be? What lessons can we learn in terms of what it means to be good stewards of God’s creation and get out of this greedy, consumer-driven mindset that we’ve grown accustomed to? How can we learn to better care for the most vulnerable people around us? How do we re-define what it means to be a community of Christ, and what will that look like from now on? Lots to ponder. Lots to reflect on. But hey ... isn’t that what we’re supposed to be doing during Lenten Season anyway?