

Jesus heals a blind man . . . a man who had been blind from birth, but now, miraculously is able to see! Today we have yet another encounter, between Jesus and a blind man, which is totally different from the other encounters of the past 3 weeks. This encounter becomes an opportunity for greater understanding, but also underlines the issue of not only physical blindness, but also spiritual blindness!

But do you notice how the story begins? It begins with the disciples' question to Jesus about **blame**. The disciples, rather than looking at this man's situation, feeling a sense of empathy and compassion for what is his lot in life . . . they ask Jesus **whose sin has caused this man to be blind from birth**. It has to be someone's fault! It has to be someone's responsibility! This man must have done something to deserve his lot in life!

Isn't that what we always seem to come back to? Someone is at fault. Someone is to blame. There must be something wrong with that individual that caused this to happen!

We know that it was common in Jesus' time to believe that for every affliction someone had to be guilty. And so, in a sense, the disciples question is quite rational and logical in their mind . . . “*Who sinned, this man or his parents?*” And the blind man . . . in all his years of blindness was probably asking a similar question. Why has this happened to me? Have I done something terribly wrong? Am I being punished? Is my blindness because of me?

But the issue of a direct correlation between sin and blindness, represents a view of God that is simply wrong! People had that view then. And they have it today. But this understanding of God must be put away and dismissed! It's not right. Jesus says it emphatically and directly, “*Neither this man nor parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.*”

- Yet when tragedies occur, we human beings instinctively ask the question,
- Why is this happening to me?
 - Why did God do this to me?
 - Why is God punishing me?
 - God must have a purpose for allowing my child to die, for this accident to have happened.
 - There must be a reason that this flood has come to our town.

Jesus says that there is no connection between sin and physical blindness. Instead, Jesus says that even such tragedies in life, may actually be the occasion for God to manifest His works and show His glory.

Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote the popular book several years ago, *Why Bad Things Happen to Good People*, which addresses the problem of blame.

Unfortunately, just as in Jesus' day, blame continues to be the natural assumption. We always look for someone to blame! But it's not just individuals that we blame. We blame the government. We blame the system. We blame our parents. We blame the church. We blame the educational system. We blame the corporations. We blame the insurance companies. We blame the doctors. Someone has to be at fault! Someone is to blame! Our very legal system is designed for someone to take the blame, for someone or some entity to take the responsibility . . . for someone to pay . . . cause and effect!

After the Katrina disaster of a couple years ago, initially there was so much rhetoric and political response, based on trying to find someone to blame for the disaster. The government didn't act quickly enough. The Corps of Engineers didn't monitor the levees well enough. The National Guard was not called in soon enough. The city of New Orleans was unprepared for a natural disaster, even though they had been warned.

Even the insurance contracts who categorize disasters like Katrina as an "act of God" – that very term, suggests that God directed this whole disaster out by His divine intent.

I remember a conversation I had here at church with an individual during our food drive . . . where we tried to fill our semi to take down to New Orleans to provide food for those who were without. This person was going on and on about the corrupt political system in Louisiana, why people built homes on the flood plains, why the government didn't do more to help, and why we were raising money to help people who shouldn't be living there anyway. And finally I said, "*We're just trying to get food to people who are hungry.*" This isn't about blame. It's about caring for people! But isn't it interesting how "the blame scenario" just comes up so naturally by all of us!

And sometimes we don't simply blame others . . . we let the blame fall on ourselves. We put it on ourselves.

- If I would have just been a better parent, my son would have turned out differently.
- If I would have been a better husband, a better wife, my marriage would have worked.
- If I would have been a better performer at work or in my career, things may not have ended up the way they did . . . things might have been different.
- And self-blame is probably the worst kind of blame there is.

And that's why we all need the healing power of Jesus. Jesus heals the blind man, but first He passes judgment. Jesus comes first as judge, and he says of the blind man, "*Neither he nor his parents sinned.*" That's Jesus' judgment. Sometimes what we need to know most of all, is that we are not to blame for what happens in life.

But there are people who will try to focus that blame. There are people and groups of people who will continue to implicate and to accuse. Let's look at a few from this Gospel text:

THE PHARISEES

The Pharisees are the central negatives in the story. They persist in their religious heritage so strongly that they turn a deaf ear and close their eyes to anything new that God might be doing. God has revealed Himself through the Law, the Torah. That's it. There isn't anything else. And Jesus suggests that this attitude is spiritual blindness! In other words, a person can be extremely religious and very faithful to religion and be blind to Jesus and His message!

The Pharisees have already passed judgment on Jesus. The Bible says it very clearly: *“They did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight.” (John 4:18)*

So, Jesus offers the Pharisees, just like the blind man, His judgment. But the Pharisees think they already understand. They don't need to be told anything! They don't see things from Jesus' perspective. And so, Jesus tells them, *“Your guilt remains.”* In the end, they are, where they have left the blind man. They are still in their own guilt. It is not difficult to sympathize with the Pharisees. They were only attempting what many of us have been trained to do: observe, describe and explain the phenomena. But they were spiritually blind! They could not see the possibility for God acting in a new and different way! But these Jewish authorities were arrogant, judgmental, and blind themselves. They just didn't know it . . . or were unwilling to acknowledge it!

THE NEIGHBORS

The blind man's neighbors raise another question. They don't believe that this is the same man that was blind either. Such a miracle couldn't happen. How can a man born blind suddenly receive his sight! It doesn't make logical and rational sense!

Now understand, that there is no suggestion here that any of us ought to be believe anything that comes along in life without a critical assessment and examination. But on the other hand, as we think about the awesome presence of God and God's ways, a sense of humility is definitely called for.

- Can any of us we really presume to know how God works?
- Can any of us hope to understand it all?
- People with genuine faith and a deep sense of grace and awe . . . recognize the limitations of their knowledge and they reserve judgment until such time that there is a more complete understanding. Religiously speaking, you cannot say that something could not have happened. *“With God, all things are possible!”*

Richard Lischer is a professor of preaching at Duke University. He tells the story about a congregation he once served. One of the pillars of that congregation stopped by the office just before services to tell him that he'd been *“born again.”*

“You've been what?”

"I visited my brother-in-law's church, the Running River of Life Tabernacle, and I don't know what it was, but something happened and I'm born again and I'm going to be re-baptized."

"You can't be born again . . . you're a Lutheran. You are the chairman of the council." Pastor Lischer said, "He was brimming with joy, but I was sulking. Why? Because spiritual renewal is wonderful, as long as it occurs within acceptable channels and does not threaten my understanding of God."

In John's Gospel, the story of the blind man's cure takes exactly two verses; the controversy surrounding the cure takes 39 verses. The church has always been pretty good at investigating irregularities but not so good at acknowledging the power of God that can be contained by no religious premises.

THE PARENTS

And the Pharisees questioned the parents, *"Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How does he now see?"* But the parents are afraid of these religious leaders and what they might do to them. They refuse to respond for fear of persecution and expulsion from the synagogue, so they defer to their son and say, *"He is of age. Ask him!"*

The parents of the healed man also demonstrate another type of spiritual darkness. Fear of speaking out and failure to stand up for truth and justice will always keep us in darkness. The parent's fear has taken a better hold of them, and therefore they miss the opportunity to profess their faith in Jesus. We are invited us to distance ourselves from the timid and fearful attitude of the parents, who refused to stick their necks out for their son.

THE BLIND MAN HIMSELF

The Pharisees asked the blind man himself, to accept their judgment on Jesus. And when he answers them, suggesting that Jesus is truly from God, they pass judgment on him . . . *"You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us? And they drove him out!" (John 4:34)*

The blind man, who now could see, didn't know all the correct religious language. He was not pious in the traditional sense. He certainly wasn't respectful of his elders. What he knew for sure was that for most of his life, he sat in darkness, and now the whole world was drenched in sunlight. And that is what he acknowledged.

"One thing I know," he said. *"that though I was blind, now I see."* And as he makes his witness to Jesus, he is cast out of the synagogue. He is cut off from the Torah, family, from the sweet-smelling incense of the Sabbath, the certitude of the Law. He loses everything, all because he looked deeply and directly into the Light of the World!

The interesting thing about the whole encounter is that blind man does not ask to be healed. **Jesus takes the initiative to heal the man**, and the man completely obeys Jesus' command. He goes, he washes, he returns, and he sees.

But his healing leads into turmoil instead of jubilation and joy! And then, Jesus is no where to be found! Why?

- Where is Jesus when the man is being questioned, harassed and attacked?
- Why is Jesus absent?
- While this healed man is trying his best to answer questions, it is obvious that his knowledge of Jesus is far from perfect. Yet in these circumstances there is no sudden flash of revelation and insight from heaven.
- The man simply stumbles along, doing his best with his limited knowledge of Jesus.

The blind man struggles in his own testimony, but the more the blind man is attacked, the deeper he seems to grow in his understanding of Jesus. Finally, they meet again. *“Do you believe in the Son of Man?” He answered, “And who is he, sir? Tell me so that I may believe in him.” Jesus said to him, “You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.” He said, “Lord, I believe. And he worshipped him!”*

Jesus’ encounter with the blind man shows us that He can bring light to our life . . . that He can bring us out of our own spiritual darkness . . . that He can make all things bright and beautiful.

All of us are invited to walk humbly with the man born blind. We are all invited to move from darkness and into the light, bearing witness to who Jesus really is at all cost as the true light of the world. As disciples of Jesus, we are called to perform the works of God, so that the glory of God might be revealed in order to help others discover their spiritual sight. Believe in Jesus! Trust Him! See the light! Amen.