

“Blackballed”
John 9:1-11, 24-25; Psalm 23

Every word the mother spoke dripped with her anguish. The images of her sixteen year old daughter crashing over the I-85 guardrail and rolling over and over flooded her mind, and her heart. She knew what had happened, but she couldn't explain why.

Yes, the girl was going over the speed limit. And there was speculation, later confirmed that she was talking on her cell phone. But no one really saw what happened, whether she lost control, or hit something in the road, or just wasn't paying close enough attention. What was for certain was that she was not doing anything different from millions of other teenagers all over the world at that very moment. Yet, those millions of other teenagers arrived safely at home that night and retreated to their warm bed. While this unfortunate young woman had lost her life.

And, now, the mother sat before her pastor and wanted to know why.

“Why did this happen to my child? She was a good person, went to church, made all A's in school, helped at United Ministries. Why did God allow this to happen to her, to us?”

“What terrible sin did she commit that God would punish her by taking her life? Or, was it our fault?” she pleadingly asked the pastor. “Did we do something wrong? Did we not raise her right? Is God punishing me because my church pledge is not big enough, or my husband drinks too much, or that we are just not good people? Tell me pastor, tell me, who is to blame?”

“As [Jesus] walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’”

The Bible remains relevant and powerful in our lives because it continues to speak to our deepest hurt and anguish, our most central fears and desires. Our scripture passage begins with a topic that still perplexes us, the question of suffering. Though we may attempt to explain suffering with theological or intellectual propositions, each of us who has unexpectedly lost a loved one, been afflicted with an inexplicable disease, or watched our children suffer, experience this question on a personal level that makes the intellectual quest feel superficial. And, that is the situation in our scripture as Jesus passes by a man blind since birth.

“Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” First century Jewish theology tied suffering to sin. If something bad happened to you, your sin was to blame, or the sin of your parents if you were born with a malady such as blindness. We all understand this assumption because it was usually correct. Most of the destructive elements of life we bring on ourselves — but not always. Jesus surprises his disciples with a “but not always” answer, claiming that neither the sin of the man nor his parents created the blindness, rather the man's blindness was an opportunity for God's work to be done. Otherwise, God didn't will or cause it, but the man's suffering was a chance for God's people, or in this case, God's Son, to respond with Godly care and compassion.

Jesus spits on the ground, makes a little mud and spreads it on the man's eyes. Again, in the ancient world, saliva, especially of famous people, was believed to contain

curative powers. Jesus tells the blind man to wash his eyes in the Pool of Siloam. He does and it restores his sight.

Immediately, his neighbors gather around to examine this blind beggar who has miraculously obtained his eyesight. Well, they take him to the Pharisees who begin to question him, especially since the healing occurred on a Sabbath, which violated religious law. But the Pharisees are divided as to how an obvious sinner, since Jesus performed the healing on the Sabbath, could possibly do this miraculous good deed. Old Testament thought said God did not hear the prayers of a bad man. So, they ask the healed man how he thinks this individual could accomplish this deed and he replies, "He is a prophet."

With that irritating analysis, the religious authorities seek out the man's parents to be certain he really was blind, plus to discover if they know how this occurred. Likely reflecting the conflict between church and synagogue when John is writing this gospel rather than when Jesus was alive, the parents insist the son speak for himself because they fear being excommunicated from their synagogue.

So, once again, the religious authorities approach the healed man and say, "Give glory to God!", which at that time meant, "Tell the truth in the presence and name of God! We know that this man is a sinner!" And verse twenty-five provides one of the great affirmations of the Bible as the healed man replies, "I do not know if he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see."

Recognizing that the authorities are unhappy with this response, the brave healed man then pushes all their buttons. Employing their theology against them, he notes that God only listens to those who worship God and obey his will. Which means Jesus could not have performed this healing if he was not from God.

Angrily noting that the healed man must be a sinner because he was born blind, they push him away from them. Where Jesus finds him.

"Do you believe in the Son of Man?" he asks the healed beggar.

"Lord, I believe."

A woman stood by the side of the road helplessly looking at a flat tire. A passerby noticed her dire situation, decided to be a Good Samaritan and stopped to help. After he had changed the tire, he went to let the jack down and the woman said to him, "Let the jack down easy. My husband is sleeping in the back seat."

Like the characters in our scripture, we will always struggle to understand our life, and many of the people who populate it.

"One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see."

There are many elements of the Christian faith we do not understand. Though I find a literal interpretation of the Bible to be intellectually and theologically deficient, I certainly grasp its appeal. We want certainty, reliability, firmness. Tell me what is true, what God says, that's all I need to know. But the fact is the Bible does contradict itself. Names, places, events don't always match up. Our literal, scientific, western society mindset doesn't always coordinate with the biblical writers' fondness for myth, metaphor, theology before facts. Biblical interpretation is messy, inexact, highly subjective, and though we don't like to admit it, culturally tinged.

But no matter what methodology we employ to understand the Bible, life seldom fits neatly into those categories. Look at our scripture and put yourself in the place of the Pharisees. Remember, the Pharisees were the most faithful and committed members of

Judaism. These were not bad, antagonistic people. They truly wanted to do God's will. And like every one of us with our religious view of right and wrong, they carried preconceived notions of how to interpret events. They knew God wanted the Sabbath to be holy and had written laws based on the scripture to define that. Their rules, their beliefs, weren't intended to harm people, but to make them more holy, draw them closer to God.

They also believed that God did not hear the prayers of a bad person, that a sinner could not do miraculous works. So along comes Jesus who must be a sinner because he breaks the Sabbath by healing on it, yet if he is a sinner how did he do this wonderful work that could only be accomplished with the help of God?

For us, like the Pharisees, life so often makes shambles of our theological parameters. Evil people get rich. Good people get cancer. Parents survive their children.

We see Christians pit themselves against one another, each claiming God is on their side. Abortion, homosexuality, healthcare, biblical interpretation, capital punishment, the list can go on and on with opposing sides all claiming to speak for God. In fairness to, and a measure of sympathy for, the Pharisees in our scripture, we understand their dilemma of trying to figure out life, and God's place within it.

And that is why the healed man's affirmation speaks so strongly and powerfully to each and every one of us: "One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." The proof of the Christian faith is that those who were once blind, now see. Jesus forgives us, changes us, heals us.

Revenge turns into forgiveness;

Hate transforms into love;

Pride becomes humility;

Selfishness transitions into sharing.

We were once blind, but now we see. We're not perfect. How well we see waxes and wanes. But we know that beyond a shadow of a doubt, God has changed us. We can see. We may struggle to understand how God is working in the world, but we can see for certain how he has worked in us.

A Denver hospice physician tells about driving home from a meeting one evening about five, stuck in traffic on Colorado Blvd., when his car started to choke and splutter and die. He writes:

I barely managed to coast, cursing, into a gas station, glad only that I would not be blocking traffic and would have a somewhat warm spot to wait for the tow truck. Before I could make the call, I saw a woman walking out of the quickie mart building, and it looked like she slipped on some ice and fell into a gas pump, so I got out to see if she was okay.

When I got there, it looked more like she had been overcome by sobs than that she had fallen; she was a young woman who looked really haggard with dark circles under her eyes. She dropped something as I helped her up, and I picked it up to give it to her. It was a nickel. At that moment, everything came into focus for me: the crying woman, the ancient Suburban crammed full of stuff with three kids in the back (one in a car seat), and the gas pump reading \$4.95. I asked her if she was okay and if she needed help, and she just kept saying, "I don't want my kids to see me crying," so we stood on the other side of the pump from

her car. She said she was driving to California and that things were very hard for her right now. So I asked, “And you were praying?”

That made her back away from me a little, but I assured her I was not a crazy person and said, “He heard you, and He sent me.” I took out my card and swiped it through the card reader on the pump so she could fill up her car completely, and while it was fueling, walked to the next door McDonald’s and bought two big bags of food, some gift certificates for more, and a big cup of coffee. She gave the food to the kids in the car, who attacked it like wolves, and we stood by the pump eating fries and talking a little.

She told me her name, and that she lived in Kansas City. Her boyfriend left two months ago and she had not been able to make ends meet. She knew she wouldn’t have money to pay rent January 1, and finally, in desperation, had called her parents, with whom she had not spoken in about five years. They lived in California and said she could come live with them and try to get on her feet there.

So, she packed up everything she owned in the car. She told the kids they were going to California for Christmas, but not that they were going to live there. I gave her my gloves, a little hug and said a quick prayer with her for safety on the road. As I was walking over to my car, she said, “So, are you like an angel or something?”

This definitely made me cry. I said, “Sweetie, at this time of year angels are really busy, so sometimes God uses regular people.”

If you open your eyes and look, all around you are regular people who were once blind, but now they see.

“Blackballed”

Verse thirty-five tells us that after the religious authorities blackballed the healed man, driving him out of their midst, Jesus found him and offered him a life of faith. I like that phrase from this verse: “...Jesus found him...” It means Jesus went looking for him, specifically him, to offer a new life.

Today, Jesus is looking for you. Yes, there are many elements of life and faith we do not understand. But when we look around us, we can quickly discover formerly blind people who now see, people once blinded by ego and selfishness who now display lives of love, forgiveness, and service. The question isn’t whether or not you and I are blinded by our sin. All of us are. The real question is: Do you want to see?

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