

St. Mary's and Trinity Episcopal Churches
March 26, 2017
Year A; 4th Sunday in Lent
1st Samuel 16: 1-13
Psalm 23
John 9: 1-41

"In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." Amen.

For the second Sunday in 2 weeks we have a Gospel reading alive with brisk dialogue, action, arguments, and even, yes, a little sarcasm!

And again, for the second time in 2 weeks we have a central character, this time the man born blind, who, like the Samaritan woman last week, does not seek Jesus out, does not ask for help. Instead Jesus seeks him out, and offers a new path and new life..." once I was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see"

I want to highlight 2 points in this rich and lively Gospel reading, the first to do with how all these different groups react to the man, noting that each group reacts with some level of fear to the good news of this man's healing.

Second we will return to that opening question from the disciples:

"Rabbi, who sinned: this man or his parents, causing him to be born blind?"

First, the reactions of all these folks to this man...this man who, as now an adult, has been blind since he was born, at least 20 years or more, the blindness now a seemingly permanent part of who he is.....

The disciples start the action by wondering why the man is blind, assuming, as was common in those days, that illness and disabilities were the result of sin.

The followers of Jesus are not concerned for the man, and seem to almost take a philosophical or intellectual perspective on the man, who is sitting there with useless eyes, only able to beg.

This intellectual perspective allows them to keep the man at arm's length, a technique that we all can use to keep our hearts out of our faith. We might fear that if we really see and know what life is like for the disabled, the poor...those

widows orphans and strangers the Bible commands us over and over to care for.
....

If the disciples got too close to the blind man and his plight they might have to change their lives and hearts deeply and radically, a change they fear, and we can too.

Next, after he is healed the man goes home....we can only imagine the overwhelming experience of being able to see now, to guide himself, to see the trees, his home, the faces of people he has known but never seen....And as the man is enthralled in his new sight....the neighbors are not joyous but suspicious, again afraid....

First they question whether it is really him...then they ask questions not about him and how he is, but about the details of the healing.....who did this? Where? How?

The neighbors too are reacting with fear, fear of the change that this man's healing challenges them to see and to even expect. If he could be healed and change so much, what would happen if I were healed? Better to pepper him with questions, then to allow the miracle to sink in and receive the holy word it brings, the word calling each of us to consider courageous change....

Third, the Pharisees or religious leaders debate as to whether this healer, Jesus, has broken any of the religious laws in doing this healing on the Sabbath, the day of rest. They quickly find Jesus guilty and condemn his actions on the Sabbath, completing ignoring the miracle.

Their fear is focused on what would happen to them if this prophet continues to gain popularity with the people.... They fear losing their authority and power if the people follow Jesus....all the power structures will change.... They might no longer be in charge.....and who would they be without their robes and titles and power...?

Finally, the blind man's parents, are the most honest in their fear, very wary of being questioned, they work to avoid answering questions from the religious leaders, even sending the interrogating wolves back to their son, as they fear, if they confirm their son's healing as a miracle.....they will lose their place in the community, both their home and the religious community. For 2 elderly folks a lot to lose....

Fear is the reaction from each group as the man moves about the neighborhood after Jesus heals him...Fear in many forms and tones, but always there....Fear of

drawing close to suffering, fear of being transformed by it, fear of change, fear of losing power and control, fear of losing place and belonging....

When fear controls our reactions and decisions, all room for God's light, God's grace and love is stifled, pushed out. Perfect love casts out fear...and perfect fear casts out love.....

Finally, I do want to return to that opening question from the disciples:

“Rabbi, who sinned: this man or his parents, causing him to be born blind?”

I mentioned earlier that this question refers to the belief that if a person was ill or disabled (born blind for instance) or in deep trouble (as Job was).....these misfortunes were believed to have been caused by sin, by wickedness or ill behavior, recent or long ago...

And so the only question needed, as Jesus' followers asked, was the wickedness perpetuated by the parents or by the man? In other words, when things go wrong, who's fault is it?

And most sadly, this belief was naturally coupled with the understanding then that God sent the misfortune, God sent the illness, the disability, in response to one's sin.....God is then a punishing God.....

Now we can say we are modern and understand that illness and disability and difficult times come from a myriad of causes, and not from sin and a punishing God....but there is perhaps a little hidden part of us...that still believes this fault finding.....When bad things happen we can all look inward and see a place we fell short....We are so human, aren't we?

And we are all, indeed, periodically, the “wretch” that so needs God's saving and amazing grace....But we need to remember that our God is the God of that grace, and love, and light.....

We need to hear Jesus's answer to the disciples' question:

“Jesus said, “You're asking the wrong question. You're looking for someone to blame. There is no such cause-effect here. Look instead for what God can do.”

Look instead for what God can do.....Illness and tragedy and disability will come into our human lives, but we must hear and know God does NOT send them, God is with us in all of our valleys of the shadow of death....God is there comforting us, spreading a table for us.....loving us, always.

Look instead for what God can do....within our tragedies God is there, not causing them, but God uses everything, everything in our lives....What is God doing, what is God working in our days, within, not only after our crises?

Where is the light shining in our darkness? Where can we encourage light in the world's darkness?

I want to end today with a favorite prayer of mine...I don't know about you but the fear comes for me, I get far from God, in the dark of the night, those 2am anxieties. I keep this prayer by our bed, to draw me back to the light....

Let us pray:

"Now into the keeping of God I put all doings of today. All disappointments, hindrances, forgotten things, negligences; all gladness and beauty, love, delight, achievement; all that people have done for me, all that I have done for them, my work and my prayers. And I commit all the people whom I love to his shepherding, to his healing and restoring, to his calling and making; for the sake of him who is the light which darkness shall never overcome." (Margaret Cooper; 1886-1980)

Amen.

The Rev. Megan Limburg