

Sermon – “A Blind Opportunity” – John 9:1-12 – March 22, 2020

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We are living in uncertain times. We are in the midst of a worldwide crisis that has uprooted our understanding of anything relating to the word “normal.” With few exceptions, every person is having to make adjustments in their daily lives. Some are minor, most are major. These disruptions are too numerous to count. Too extraordinary for us to even fully comprehend in the moment, because changes are coming so quickly, we are forced to reevaluate every decision as soon as it is made.

In the midst of all this change, we, as the church, we as the community of faith, need to take a leadership role in how we face it. Remember the message from just a few ago – though now it feels like ages have passed – we were studying the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew’s gospel, the passage where Jesus told his disciples – You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. If ever we were to live into the identities of salt and light, that time is now.

We have the responsibility to model faithful actions during this crisis, no matter how long it lasts. This is something we are all in together, regardless of those things that previously have kept people apart. Literally no one is immune to this virus. It is novel. But, the impact of this virus is quite different for many different types of people and groups. For some it is being taken as merely an inconvenience, for others it holds an uneasy balance between life and death. As human beings, as part of the human race, a faithful response is to cherish and protect the lives of the most vulnerable – to take this health crisis seriously, and to care for one another.

I was struck by the appropriateness of the lectionary lesson for this week from John’s gospel. The lesson actually covers the entire 41 verses of the 9th chapter of the gospel, but today I think the first 12 verses on their own have much to teach us.

The tale begins while Jesus is walking in Jerusalem with his disciples. It is the Sabbath. They come across a blind man, and the disciples stop in their tracks, point to him, and turn him into an object lesson. It doesn’t matter that he’s sitting right there, able to hear every word. They begin talking about him, and they want Jesus to tell them what is the reason for this man’s punishment.

In the belief system of that time period, it was assumed that any hardship that a person suffered was a consequence of sin. The disciples interpreted the man’s blindness as a divine punishment for someone’s wrongdoing. Did the parents sin, and thus their child was afflicted at birth, or was his own sin so overwhelming that it caused the blindness. While we don’t generally believe that afflictions are direct punishment for sin, we often do put God to the question, wondering what we did to deserve our affliction, did we do something to offend God?

Why do we do this? It is in our nature to assign blame. In order to make sense out of tragedy, we attempt to discover a reason for it. Someone must be at fault, so we start pointing fingers in all directions. Take for instance the creation story. Adam blames Eve for giving him the forbidden fruit. Eve blames the serpent for tricking her into eating it. Why not blame God for putting the tree there in the first place?

Do you see how unhelpful blame is? It never solves the original problem. The function of blame is to create a point at which we can direct our anger. It is never helpful, and it generally creates a scapegoat – a person or a group of people – who suddenly become the target for a lot of negativity. So, in our current pandemic, there are those who want to believe that the people of China are at fault, and so prejudice begins toward a certain group people, perhaps resulting in hate crimes.

Others say it is God's punishment for the actions of one or another group of people. Still others theorize that the virus was a bioweapon that got loose from some science lab.

All blame does is to create mistrust, dissension, division, and anger. So not helpful.

Jesus directs his disciples away from playing the blame game. God is not in the business of zapping people for their misdeeds – God doesn't throw blindness at people because someone messed up. And them arguing about it right there in front of the poor man isn't doing anything positive for him. If anything, it is making him quite uncomfortable.

Instead, Jesus wants them to see the opportunity.

Jesus responds to the disciples' question saying that this man was born blind, so that God's works might be revealed in him. What does that mean? It means this - Look, instead of focusing on blaming, here is an opportunity to do God's work. To show compassion. To show mercy. To care for another human being. Where we want to assign blame, God may be giving us an opportunity for loving our neighbor, no matter who that neighbor is, or what that neighbor might need.

And so, Jesus does just that. Loves his neighbor. He does it in a really odd manner. Using his own saliva to make mud from the dust on the ground, he slathers it onto the eyes of the blind man and then tells him to go wash in the pool, and then he could see. I personally don't recommend this process, the using of saliva for healing, particularly now with concerns over keeping things disinfected.

However, it is in this time that we need to focus on caring for each other. So, follow the guidelines of our health professionals in regard to social distancing, quarantine, and proper hygiene practices, and stand up to those who are not and are putting other people at risk. This isn't a time for rugged individualism, and proclaiming your rights to do as you please. Now is the time to put the needs of society over your own liberties. This is the moment for the light of Christ to shine in and through us.

I can't think of any person who is not affected in some way by this pandemic. Think about that for a moment.

Every person is living into some kind of new normal, that is continually changing. Friends, be gentle with one another, be gentle with yourselves. Don't focus on the negative or try to assign to blame, and don't listen to those who do. We don't know what is going to happen tomorrow, next week, or next month. And guess what, we never do. But this pandemic has opened our eyes to something that has been and always will be, there right in front of us. It's just way more pronounced in a time of crisis. It's this - every situation presents an opportunity to respond.

Like Jesus told the disciples who asked about why the man was born blind. They were focused on the wrong thing, trying to figure out who was to blame. Jesus wanted them to see, here is a man who happens to be blind, how are you going to respond to him? Here is an opportunity to do God's work. Every situation is an opportunity to do God's work. Right now, the world is in a time of crisis. How will you respond?