

“That the Works of God Might Be Displayed”

Jesus answered, “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him” (John 9:3).

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound,
that saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost, but now am found;
was blind but now I see.*

A blind man, born into a dark world, begged for any help his sorry state might elicit. Yet, instead of mercy, the disciples responded to his obvious need with this callous query: “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Today’s Gospel reading begins with this question, and in asking this it, the disciples revealed a deeply flawed assumption that linked suffering and illness, disability and tragedy to the disobedient behavior of the afflicted. Without batting an eye, they conclude that this poor, blind beggar must have had it coming, or at least, this was God’s punishment for the sins of his parents. Afterall, if they were truly living moral and obedient lives, then God would never have allowed such a fate as this inborn blindness.

The disciples came to Jesus with a theology of glory that put themselves at the center of the story. In essence, they thought that if you were a good person, then God would reward you; and if you were a bad person, then you would receive from God the punishment your sins deserved. To be fair, they employed this cause and effect understanding of God to make some sense of suffering, but more importantly, in their minds, this mindset allowed them to justify their own position before God by giving them some control over what was happening in their lives...and we do exactly the same thing!

This is such an important reading for us to consider because human suffering always leaves us asking the question, “Why?” It’s the question Job’s friends tried to answer in the face of his woes, it’s the question asked of Jesus in today’s reading, and it’s the very same question we ask when we find ourselves face to face with disappointment, and suffering, and loss. Why?!? Why me? What have I done to deserve this? Why am I being punished?

These questions are common to all of us, and they come naturally to us, because, deep down in our heart of hearts, we all think that our salvation somehow depends on us. That if we can just be good, and work hard, and plan well, and do enough to help others, then we will be spared from suffering and rewarded with good things...and this flawed and arrogant theology always points us away from Christ and instead to our own sinful hearts. And yet, when our hearts are held up to the light of a holy God who demands perfection (James 2:10), the truth is, we are *not* good. Not one of us can claim this. Not one of us can stand before God with clean hands, and this self-justifying Old Adam – this natural man that lives in our hearts and desires to be god – it must be put to death. And that is exactly what Jesus is doing in today’s reading when He says to his disciples: “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but (this has happened) that the works of God might be displayed in him” (John 9:3).

In these words, Jesus rips apart the faulty framework the disciples had relied on to give them control and make sense of suffering. In these words, He destroys their self-centered theology of glory. And in these words, Jesus directs them back to a God who is always working to accomplish His saving purpose *even through suffering!*

From the beginning of His ministry to its bloody conclusion, Jesus is clear about His purpose. He came to save sinners! He came to seek the lost! He came to heal the sick, and give sight to the blind, to restore hope to the hopeless, and to preach the Good News that God takes “no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked” would turn from their ways and live (Ezekiel 33:11). And, my friends, by tearing down the false foundations of a salvation that depends on us, Jesus shows us that we are indeed the very ones who need saving! That – like the Disciples – we are the lost and hopeless and blind and sick! And when we recognize this truth about ourselves, when we face up to the darkness of our heart and the blindness of our eyes, the word of the Christ is for us, and it saves us!

No matter how soul sick a person may be, Christ can heal him. No matter how deeply a person has fallen into the corruption of sin, Christ can pull him out. No matter how troubled, frightened, or afflicted a person may be, Christ can comfort him. Whatever condition a person is in, even if he is convinced that he will die because of it, he can know that as certainly as God lives, God does not want the death of any sinner. And instead He says to us sinners, “You will not perish; instead, you have been saved.” And my friends, today, this is God’s promise to you.

So, as forgiven and saved followers of Jesus living with the reality of a broken and sinful world, what do we do when we see suffering? And what do we do when we see pain? We understand these trials in the light of God’s promise that right here and right now, in our time and in our world, the works of God will be displayed. And rather than make judgments and cast aspersions, we can step into the breach and can reach out in compassion, and in our love for our hurting neighbor, the works of God will be displayed.

So, we step up and we make meals for wounded, and we jump in and we care for children without a place to go, and we give from our plenty to help those who are in want remembering that Christ has freed us to help, and serve, and love others in practical, personal, and powerful ways without judging their merit or debating their worth. And we can do this with confidence in the promise that Christ goes before us, and that Christ works within us, and that in our callings as parents and children and friends and neighbors, the work of the Lord will be done.

What did Jesus do in the face of suffering? Jesus helped and Jesus healed. He joined sinners in their suffering, so that the works of God might be displayed. And today, they are displayed in you. Go with the peace of this promise God has made to you today. Amen.

Pastor Thomas A. Eggold

