God's Works 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.

It's not the destination, it's the journey. It's the process not the results. It's about the things learned along the way, not just the achievement at the end. These are just three of many other variations of this inspirational theme that our goal in life shouldn't be to appreciate the end only but also the means that lead to the end. This inspirational concept often surfaces when motivation is needed to get through difficult situations, even times of suffering.

When it comes to suffering, this idea is easier to swallow when the suffering that's experienced is somewhat understandable. For example, the suffering of surgery and rehab for a joint replacement or a ligament tear makes some sense. At times the body gives out and the best way to recover to is to endure this necessary suffering. Yes, it's not something we'd call enjoyable or desirable, but we can wrap our minds around what the end likely will be and that makes the journey somewhat worth it. Knowing that many others have experienced these same setbacks and come through them helps make the recovery process more bearable.

Consider one other example of suffering that we understand even if it's something we don't enjoy. Suffering that comes because of poor choices. Something like timeouts, probations or suspensions after misbehaving. At home, at school, at work, even out on the road, etc., life is full of situations when certain lines are crossed consequences must be suffered. Again, we may not appreciate this kind of suffering, but we usually understand how this kind works. It's cause and effect. Do the crime; do the time. So, in many cases the recognition of the misdeed helps bring acceptance to the suffering even to the point of admitting that this suffering is ultimately for good. Those are the success stories we often hear; the journey of recovery was as critical if not more critical than the result.

In both types of suffering there is some sort of understanding. On the one hand, understanding is gained because suffering is the choice that leads to better healing. On the other hand, understanding is found because suffering is earned as a consequence and intended correction of a poor choice. Each situation has a why that might at least help us come to terms with the suffering experienced. That why can allow us to more easily swallow the sentiment, it's not the destination, it's the journey.

This weekend's Gospel reading really challenges everything we've just mentioned about common experiences of suffering. When Jesus encounters the man born blind, His disciples' question lines up with some of the things we mentioned earlier. Their question appears to be an attempt to understand the why of this man's suffering. If he's blind from birth, it's not some sort of choice that leads to a better end, it must be cause and effect. Someone sinned and caused his suffering. So, Jesus, who was it? His parents or himself? Talk about adding insult to injury! On top of the suffering this man endured from his blindness to many, he or his family were also marked as exceptionally wicked sinners! That's another whole level of suffering!

To this implication, Jesus responds, **"It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him."** *(John 9:3)* Truly, an eye-opening response (pun-intended)! Jesus dismissed this cause-and-effect relationship between suffering and personal sin that His disciples assumed. His statement released this man and his family from a misguided reputation. They weren't worse sinners deserving extra punishment from God and to be dismissed by Him and His followers! Rather they were remembered by God for the purpose of displaying His works. This became abundantly clear as Jesus healed this man from His blindness. Jesus had a very different why for this man's suffering.

And if we stop here, we're likely to misunderstand Jesus' use of suffering. Without the rest of this account, we'd likely figure that all that matters is what God can bring out of suffering. While this is important, it's not the fullness of God's use of suffering. At the end of our reading, this healed man suffers because of his healing. He and his family are interrogated because of this miraculous work. Eventually, this man who was healed is cast out the synagogue. The restoration to his community that this miracle also

brought was short lived. Once again, he was disregarded not for his own sin but his unwillingness to label Jesus as a sinner. In a crazy turn of events, this man who was born blind, now suffered as a rejected sinner not because of his blindness but because of his sight!

Again, Jesus entered this man's suffering. Hearing that this man was removed from the synagogue, removed from his local church, He sought him out. And through this man's suffering, Jesus made Himself known. Jesus wasn't just a rabbi. He wasn't just a man. He wasn't just a prophet. Jesus was the Son of Man, the Messiah, the One promised standing with this man in his suffering. At this revelation, the man believed and worshipped Jesus.

For this man, Jesus' use of suffering wasn't only a means to an end. Jesus used suffering as an end in and of itself. For Jesus, suffering was what He came to do. Along the way, He linked Himself to others' suffering. And by inserting Himself into their suffering, He gave intimate company to their suffering. Jesus carried the suffering He witnessed and experienced to the cross where His undeserved and greatest sufferings on the cross have become the believer's greatest gift. By His wounds, we are healed. Walking through the suffering of this world, Jesus displayed that His work, God's work, wasn't merely through suffering, but suffering itself. By His suffering, Jesus redeemed suffering to be more than a result of personal sin or more than a necessary choice for future gain. Jesus' suffering makes earthly suffering the unlikely place where He reveals His presence, comfort and hope.

I got to see this truth play out on my vicarage, my internship, years ago. One Sunday morning for Bible study, this reading from John 9 was the topic of class. As my vicarage supervisor was unpacking the tremendous reality of Jesus' words in this text, one of his members raised her hand. He called on her and she began to share a personal story. She deeply resonated with this account because of her own life. You see, she had a daughter who was born with an arm that never fully formed. This mother recalled times that as she was out and about with her daughter, others around her would have the audacity to ask her, "What did you do?" The not-so-subtle implication being that this mother had done something wrong to cause her daughter's arm not to form properly.

It was stunning to hear this modern-day connection to something that had happened so long ago. Like that man in the text, this mother also received the freedom Jesus brought in not connecting every personal suffering to some specific, personal sin. While, to my knowledge, her daughter's arm hasn't yet been miraculously restored, even at time that she shared this story, this mother and this daughter recognized their Savior's presence, comfort and hope because of His sufferings.

I don't think I need to tell any of you that what we hear in our Gospel reading still happens today. Many of you are connected to suffering that wasn't chosen or earned because of a poor choice. It may be you personally. It might be a loved one: a spouse, a child, a grandchild, a great-grandchild. Perhaps it's a dear friend. Whoever it is, Satan is very good at leading us to seek the why for this suffering in our own work or someone else's work. He's relentless in trying to convince us that our own works caused this suffering. Don't listen to him! For Jesus' freedom for the man in our reading is for you too. He comes to you as the One who still bears the marks of the cross on His hands, feet and side. He continues to bear the marks of His suffering, to assure you that even now you're not alone in your suffering. He sees you. He understands what you're experiencing. And He invites you to find the why to your suffering in Him. For when you see your suffering connected to His, there you'll find His presence, comfort and hope.

Dear suffering servants of the Suffering Servant may our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ make us slow to assume that every moment of suffering this side of heaven is a direct result of our own personal sin. May He lead us to continue to pray for miracles but to not seek them only. May He guide us with endurance to see His work on display even in our suffering. May He assure us of His presence, comfort and hope in our suffering because of His suffering. May His suffering remind us not only of the work that He can do through suffering but in the middle of suffering too. May He display His works in us now and always. Amen.

In Christ,

Pastor Dan