

March 22, 2020
Year A
John 9:1-41

The Fourth Sunday in Lent
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Emmanuel, Norwood, MA
Zoom Worship Service
Morning Prayer

Whose fault is it? There is a segment of the population, perhaps a personality type, that tends to response to a crisis situation, a situation of distress, a personal accident or tragedy or something on a more global scale, with a desire, almost a compulsion, to figure out who is to blame. Whose fault is it?

I'm sure that you're hearing that question as an undercurrent of the discussion about Coronavirus, "Whose fault is it? Who can we blame for the situation that we're in?"

There are lots of theories out there, some of them even rising to the level on conspiracy theories. I'm not going to give any of them credence or even a hint of legitimacy by restating any of them here, I just mention that they exist, because I think that they're good, if sad, examples of that human tendency to try to figure out who is to blame when things aren't going the way that we want them too.

It's also a human tendency to try to make sure that blame resides far away from us. Usually we come to the conclusion that it's the fault of the other, of someone who is not like us.

Our gospel reading for today begins with that kind of question. A question about whose fault it is. Who's to blame?

That is the question the disciples asked Jesus about the Man Born Blind. Jesus was walking along and he saw a man who had been blind from birth, and his disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

In other words, his disciples asked him, "Whose fault is it?" Where does the blame for this man's personal tragedy reside?

Of course, Jesus was far less focused on who should receive the blame for the blind man's situation than on what should be done about it.

The man hadn't been born blind as a punishment for sin, neither his own sin nor his parents' sin. But through the man's blindness, the glory of God would be revealed; the light that Jesus had come to bring into the world would be revealed.

So, Jesus set about bringing light and sight to the man born blind. In these days of social distancing Jesus' method of healing the man might make us cringe. Jesus spit on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread it on the man's eyes and then told him to go and wash in a public pool.

While this would not be a good idea for us these days, for the man born blind, this interaction with Jesus brought sight which brought him a new kind of life. "...he went and washed and came back able to see."

And then he went back home, back to his community. By that time, it seems that Jesus and his disciples had moved on. The healed man, returned to his community, returned to his neighbors, but he was not exactly received with open arms.

At first, they did not recognize him. "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?"

Some said yes. Some said no, it's just someone who looks like him. The text says that the man kept saying, "I am the man," which implies that he had to defend his identity more than once. He could see, but his community, his neighbors couldn't see him.

His neighbors also asked him, "How were your eyes opened?" and he would tell his story. It was a strange story, but it wasn't a long or complicated story. "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' Then I went and washed and received my sight." There it was, clear and simple.

But text says that they kept asking him. Even after he had answered the question, he had to answer it over and over again. They didn't understand, they didn't believe.

So, the neighbors took the healed man to the Pharisees, to the religious leaders, to try to figure out what had happened.

Now the day that Jesus had healed the blind man was a sabbath, a day when it was forbidden to do any work. The making of mud to heal the man and the actual healing itself would have been considered to be work. So, the man's healing caused a theological crisis for the religious leaders.

Some said, "This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath." Others said, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" The text says that they were divided about this situation.

One would have thought that all that they would be able to see was the miracle, a man who had been born blind could see. What a blessing! What grace! One would think that they might have given glory to God. But they were blind to the miracle. They couldn't see the blessing of the transformed man in front of them. All they could see is how this miracle and the man who it had happened to challenged their world view.

So, the religious leaders asked the healed man himself. "What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened."

He said, "He is a prophet."

I don't know what they expected the man to say, but this was apparently the wrong answer. Because the next thing that happened was that the religious leaders decided that the man had never been blind, that it was all some kind of scam. So, they called his parents to give testimony that he had indeed been born blind.

His parents were asked, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?"

Now, the healed man's parents had a dilemma. They knew that he was their son, of course he was. They knew that he had been born blind. It seems that they also knew that Jesus had healed him. But they were afraid. They were afraid of losing their community, if they told the truth, because they had heard that anyone who confessed Jesus as the Messiah, would be cast out of the synagogue.

They were afraid that admitting that Jesus had healed their son would be all it would take to get them thrown out, so they refused to back their son up. They said, “We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.”

Because of fear, they chose to turn a blind eye to their son, to preserve their place in their community.

After his parents had abandoned him, the healed man was called before the religious leaders again. And they told him to reject Jesus.

“Give glory to God!, they said, “We know that this man is a sinner.”

But the healed man couldn’t do that. He couldn’t claim that the man who had healed him was a sinner. He didn’t know the theology of the thing. The only thing that he did know was this, “that though I was blind, now I see.”

The debate continued until finally, the healed man, said this, “Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.”

The healed man spoke with authority, but in reality, he had no power. The religious leaders made good on the threat that had frightened the healed man’s parents. They drove the healed man out of the synagogue, out of his community, with these words, “You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?”

And the man was alone.

In my sermon last Sunday, sent out by email and on our church’s Facebook page and on our website, I talked about how this Coronavirus social distancing had me looking at this year’s Lenten gospel readings in a whole new way.

Because our current circumstances had me thinking about isolation, about being alone, I had noticed a theme running through these gospel readings that I

had never seen quite as clearly before. The theme was that all of these gospel readings contain an element of “being alone”. I won’t go through all of them again, pointing out where I see that feature of “aleness” in each of the Lenten gospel readings. But I will say that this gospel reading also contains that element, but in a different way from the others.

Last week in the gospel reading about the Samaritan Woman at the Well, the woman begins the story alone and isolated from her larger community. But Jesus meets this isolated woman, this woman who was alone, and engaged her in conversation. He spent time with her, he listened to her questions and he shared her story with her.

Then he sent her back into her community, where she was given a position of authority. She became the one who was sent to share Jesus with the people around her. And “many from that city believed because of the woman’s testimony.” At the end of the story, the woman was restored to her community.

Today, the man born blind begins the story as a part of his community. His position might not have been an enviable one, but he had a position, he had a role, people knew him. He was the man who used to sit and beg. He might not have been a beloved member of the community, but he had his role to play and it seems that his neighbors had enough pity for him that he was able to survive.

But just before the end of the story, the healed man, the man who had received his sight, is alone. And he is alone because of his interaction with Jesus. Jesus healed him and because of that he was isolated from his community.

His neighbors refused to see him. His parents rejected him. The religious leaders had thrown him out of his religious community. He no longer had a place in his society.

But Jesus, who had already moved on, came back for the healed man, and in some ways, completed his healing.

He gave him a new relationship, a relationship with him, that would sustain him. Jesus came and saw him and gave him a new way to see the world.

The story ends with Jesus rebuking the Pharisees for their spiritual blindness, and we never learn what happened to the healed man, the man who had received his sight.

But I like to think that he found a place in the new community that Jesus was creating, that Jesus was breathing life into, that Jesus was giving sight to. I like to believe that he found a place in the church, a place where he was seen.

We're in a strange place in our world right now, a place that most of us thought that we would never see. A time when, because of sickness, because of isolation, because of social distance, it's pretty hard for us to see each other.

But, none of us are alone. We have Emmanuel, God with us, and we have each other, seen through the medium of fuzzy pictures on the computer screens, or experienced through pictures drawn by Sunday School students, or phone calls made, or emails sent, or groceries dropped off at people's front doors.

This story tells us two things about faith that can sustain us during these challenging days that we are living through.

It tells us that we need to remember to see each other. Even when we can't see each other with our eyes, we can see each other with our hearts, with our care, with our connection, with our prayers.

And it tells us that Jesus will never leave us alone. Jesus came back to provide a second healing to the man born blind, a healing that gave him a new community. Jesus never loses interest in us and our needs.

Jesus heals us again and again, restores us to relationship again and again, until we experienced the full and final healing that comes in resurrection.

So, wherever you are, however isolated you feel, please remember that Jesus is Emmanuel, and God is with you. Thanks be to God. Amen.