

“What Finally Matters?” 3-26-17

Old Testament, Psalm 23

New Testament, John 9:1-41

I recall a difficult situation with a friend in my college days. It surrounded the behavior of one who had alienated himself from several of us by his actions. He was blind to what he was doing. The effect was that we were finding ways to exclude him from our activities and he was feeling hurt. Several of us began to ask how we should respond. One option was to ignore the person and allow our rejection to take its toll until he quietly drifted away into the night. The other choice was to ask for an opportunity to sit down together and be honest with the person. That was more difficult, but we all felt we would honor God and each other more by doing so.

We scheduled an afternoon after church to meet. I still remember the tension. We shared one by one our perceptions and why we were responding the way we were. He offered his own perceptions and feelings of us. As the conversation evolved we discovered that we all were blind about pieces of ourselves and how we were being perceived by the other. Each of us grew from that encounter. There was confession, forgiveness offered, reconciliation and understanding and the deepening of friendship that afternoon.

John tells a story of a man born blind. Within this story there is both literal and metaphorical blindness, as there is in life. Actually, the personal blindness is the greater blindness as this story reveals. If someone asks if I am a Christian I honestly have to say, “Ask my wife, my kids, my congregation, or my neighbors”. The downside is that they would all be quick to point out my blind spots as well. Pride, arrogance, and self-awareness don’t go together. Yet we don’t grow spiritually, emotionally, and personally until we find a point of congruence between how we see ourselves and how others see us.

Isn’t that what Lent is about? Opened eyes? Seeing Jesus?

As the passage opens, we are invited to see the world of sin, pain, and suffering as Jesus sees it. We are on board with the disciple’s question; “Rabbi, who sinned, this man of his parents, that he was born blind?” We are always thinking in terms of cause and effect. A popular term for this is used in our language, karma, which is found in Hinduism and Buddhism. It refers to the sum of a person’s actions in this and previous states of existence, as viewed as deciding their fate or destiny. Underlying it is the principle of retributive justice. We refer to good karma or bad karma. It is the law of moral causation.

So the disciples are implying that bad karma, his or that of his parents, is responsible for his blindness. Jesus redirects their and our mindsets. He opens our eyes to a new understanding to how we process good and evil. He says, “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be made manifest in him”.

Jesus opens up a window of hope and fresh air. Jesus offers us no fatalism in his gospel. Yes, there is a justice that runs in life. Paul acknowledges this to the Galatians when he writes, "Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow" (Galatians 6:7). But the gospel does not stop simply at cause and effect. Jesus refuses such a universe allowing no enigmas, no puzzles of providence or paradox to confound the mind. That is what attracts me to Jesus. He lifts us beyond a universe of no grace, no forgiveness, or a systemic justice locking us into finding reasons for things that happen. Those are often places where our small little minds like to ruminate. We jump to the question, "Who's to blame?"

Jesus says "nobody". Jesus tells us that not all justice is penal. What one finds in this life with God is grace. Life is not predetermined or fatalistic in God's economy. There is in Christ a choice of suffering, self-sacrifice, a redemptive love transcending the pattern of retributive justice. Jesus goes to a cross not because of some failure in his past that had to be expiated. He did so willingly. He gives his life as a ransom for all of us, laying down that life willingly. We may deny another's assistance by saying they brought it upon themselves. But Jesus will never do that. He sees a larger power and presence of evil and a principle of sin in the universe binding us and from which we must be delivered.

When we see pain, suffering, some great loss or ruin or affliction in another, we dare not judge that as deserving. For Jesus this becomes an opportunity for the demonstration of God's grace and power. As Richard Rohr writes, "In the divine economy of grace, it is imperfection, sin and failure that become the base metal and raw material for the redemption experience itself...salvation is sin turned on its head and used in our favor...this is how divine love transforms us" (Adapted from "Falling Upward: A Spirituality of the Two Halves of Life, pp.60-1, from Homiletics, March-April, 2017, p.44).

It is often that the losses we suffer become the vehicles of redemption for others. As we remain open to God's love and grace, our particular loss, pain, sorrow, or disability may create the opportunity that "the works of God might be revealed" through and in us.

Phillip Yancey, Christian author, was asked, "You've written three books on pain. Bottom line, what have you learned?" His reply? "Pain is good. Pain is bad. Pain can be redeemed". Out of the worst of life's offerings may come great good. How may we look at the events in our lives, especially what we would define as the tragic ones, through the lens of Christ's redemptive love? Romans 8 is extremely hopeful; "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28). Here both the goodness of creation and its fallenness are affirmed in a redemptive context. All things that happen can be redeemed to work for our ultimate good (Yancey, 'Grace Notes', p.337).

Affirming his role as the light of the world, Jesus spits on the ground, makes mud with his saliva and proceeds to spread the mud on the man's eyes. He tells him to go wash in the pool of Siloam. The man comes back able to see. Having recovered his sight people are amazed, but Jesus has disappeared. "Where is he?" they ask, but all the healed man can say is. "I do not know...One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see".

Next he finds himself being interrogated by the Pharisees. Then they interrogate his parents; "Is this your son, who you say was born blind?" How then does he now see?" For a second time they bring the man back and ask more questions. Since the healing occurs on a Sabbath they argue that Jesus could not be from God. As the convoluted conversation continues the man becomes a witness to Jesus' as a prophet, recognizing in him the works of God. Pressing him further they say; "Give glory to God! We know that this man (Jesus) is a sinner". Once again, all the man can say is, "One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see". As the man now begins to challenge their theological assumptions, they become enraged; "You were born entirely in your sins, and are you trying to teach us?" And they drove him out.

Nobody likes to be wrong. Human pride can be lethal. But that is the nature of Jesus' work in our lives. "For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted" (Matthew 23:12). We fight Jesus. Our ego and pride die hard. Actually, it is a good thing that God can see our hearts. I think of God's response to Samuel as the sons of Jesse are paraded before him to determine God's choice for a king. After rejection after rejection, the Lord says, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature...for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7).

Lent is about the shaping of our hearts. As the blind man's eyes were opened, physically and spiritually, God puts the metaphorical spittle on the eyes of our hearts. Ours is to obediently do what Jesus asks of us, to wash in our own pools of Siloam, rise, and discover the mystery of God's redemptive healing in our hearts. Jesus tells the Pharisees that day, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind".

To stay in the pride of our stubborn minds and hearts is death. Who wants to be on the wrong side, pushing against Jesus' redeeming work? I don't have any desire to hear Jesus say to me as he did to those prideful, self-driven religious leaders; "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see, your sin remains'".

It became a transforming moment as we chose to meet and face ourselves that day years ago. After the pain of shared honesty, we prayed together. Lifting our heads from that prayer, we saw each other with new eyes. Redemption and love filled our hearts toward one another, the blindness of judgement gone.

That is what finally matters; opened eyes and seeing Jesus.