

With the recent changes in our world, our Lenten journey has been swept under the rug. Our attention has been redirected to the current physical limitations, and yet, in many ways, we are in the wilderness now more than we ever wanted to be. The funny memes are flying on social media, and one of my favorites is “I really didn’t want to give up this much for Lent.” We all have limitations about what we are willing to do or to give up, but sometimes we just don’t have a choice. We don’t have control over what is happening in the world and to us. The man in the scripture today experienced that as well.

He was born with a physical ailment that he had no control over. People in the Bible with physical ailments were seen as outcasts, and they were forced to beg for their livelihood. This man was born blind, so he knew no other way of life. His blindness became part of his identity, and people knew him by his physical ailment. They limited him to his disability and only saw him as “the blind man.” They didn’t even know his name. The people assumed that he was limited in what he could offer.

So often when we have certain physical ailments that limit us, that cause us suffering, we ask Why? Why me? Why was I diagnosed with cancer? Why do I have addictive tendencies? Why are we altering our way of life because of a virus? Or like the man in scripture, why was I born blind? Notice though, it wasn’t the man who questioned, as if he had already made peace with it. It was the disciples who asked Jesus why.

The disciples asked, “Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” (v.2). That question reflects their theological thinking of the time. They

believed in a punishing God who brought suffering because of their sin. Some still think that way today. Before this whole pandemic is over, someone will say God caused it to punish us, and they will cast blame on someone’s sin. The people even believed that punishment could be passed down for generations. Any parent knows the worst suffering they could experience is watching their innocent children suffer. But, Jesus disputes this thinking.

Jesus says, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him” (v.3). That brings us to another theological question about God. Does this mean that God allowed the man’s physical ailment just so God could be glorified? God doesn’t cause suffering. As much as God loves to be glorified, God wouldn’t cause suffering to receive it. God does use everything, including our suffering and our physical ailments, to work within us.

That’s the part of the verse that is most important. Jesus said, “He was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed **in him**” (v.3). Jesus knows the way in to this man’s heart. He sees the man’s wound, his suffering from his physical ailment, and he uses that to work within him. He brings healing at just the right place in his life that will transform him, and God gets the credit.

Richard Rohr said in a Daily Meditation this week: “For God to reach us, we have to allow suffering to wound us.”¹ When we are wounded, we know that we can’t heal ourselves. We need God’s grace to enter into that wound and heal us. The man’s blindness caused him a lot of suffering; it was his wound that brought Jesus’ healing.

¹ Richard Rohr, “Love Alone Overcomes Fear”, March 19, 2020, www.cac.org.

Rohr also said in this Meditation, that “the real meaning of the word ‘suffer’ – [is] to allow someone else’s pain to influence us in a real way.”² We allow someone else’s suffering to wound us. We care so deeply for someone else’s plight, that we feel it and it causes us to act. We reach out to help that person. Jesus reached out to help the man, but the people didn’t.

After the man was healed, some of the people didn’t even recognize him. They only knew him as “the blind man.” They were unable to look beyond his physical limitations to see his humanity. Instead of celebrating and glorifying God for his healing, they argued over if this was actually the same man.

The Pharisees had a field day. The rest of the chapter describes the fall-out after the healing. The Pharisees tried every way they could to debunk the man’s healing. They accused the man that perhaps he really wasn’t born blind. They called for his parents who confirmed he was, but was fearful of being exiled from the synagogue. Anyone who had confessed that Jesus was the Messiah, was exiled. Their whole life revolved around the synagogue, so that meant they would be ostracized from society, like their son was. So, they were too fearful to make that confession about Jesus. They just confirmed that their son was born blind.

Then, the Pharisees blame Jesus for healing on the Sabbath. “That must mean that he can’t be from God,” they said, “if he didn’t keep the Sabbath holy.” Now, **Jesus** was the sinner. They keep going back to the man and asked him three times, how he was healed and who did it.

The Pharisees just could not see God’s hand in this. After their thorough investigation, they still could not come up

with an answer that they could accept. The man’s suffering did not influence them to act in a compassionate way. They did act – they became furious when they could not get the answers they wanted and expelled the man from the synagogue when he proclaimed that Jesus is the Messiah. They finally say to the man: “You were born in complete sin” (v.34). That’s the conclusion they came to. It must be the man’s fault.

We have come full circle. The disciples ask if the man’s physical ailment was caused by sin, Jesus says no, explains why, yet the people are the ones who remain blind to the truth. They settle the matter by blaming the wounded for his own ailment. The community fails the man. His neighbors, his parents, and the religious authorities all fail him. They don’t allow his suffering to wound them enough to reach out to him compassionately nor to see God’s work revealed within him.

The only one who comes through for the man is Jesus. Sometimes we feel that way. Everyone has failed us except for Jesus. Jesus is the only one we can trust in our situation. This is true, but there is more that we can learn from this story. Jesus sent the man to wash in the Pool of Siloam, which means Sent, a sending out, gushing forth with water. Jesus sent him to be sent. Jesus sends him to tell his story of healing, so others can be healed too. We are washed in water that sends us to tell our stories of Jesus.

In this time of global crisis, let us wash our hands in the Pool of Sent. Let us tell our stories of where we have seen God at work this week. Let us allow ourselves to feel someone else’s suffering that influences us in a real way, that causes us to reach out and help others.

² Ibid.

Let's not be like the neighbors, who limit people's worth to their abilities and who deflect to senseless arguing. Let's not be like the parents who are too fearful to proclaim God's work in this crisis and only stick to the facts. Let's not be like the Pharisees who try to expose the underlying conspiracy and ultimately cast blame onto others or sin.

During this time of physical limitation, let us not limit our knowledge and understanding of who Jesus is and why Jesus heals our wounds. By his wounds, we are healed, so others may experience healing too. We are sent to share our resources and our stories of healing, so that God's works might be revealed in us.

Please join me in a closing prayer:

Healing and Forgiving God, in a world filled with so much pain, we would rather shut our eyes and be blind than see things as they really are. Grant us the courage to face the reality of our world, and give us the strength to bring your light to those who walk in darkness. Help us see others as you see them, and forgive us when we do not trust you enough to open our eyes to the possibilities before us. Heal our self-inflicted blindness, O God, and lead us in the footsteps of the Light of the World, who reveals your glory in his life, his teachings, and his love. Amen.