

Announcements

- Good morning, FPC!
- For the near future, we will continue to offer Sunday morning worship at 11 am here on our church Facebook page and plan to post recorded version of the service on our website on Sunday afternoons. If you know someone who is not a Facebook user, please encourage them to head to our website to the sermon archives page to access a printed copy as well as the video.
- Our Church Committee work hasn't missed a beat as we have been conducting business by phone, email, and Zoom.
- The work of the Senior Pastor Nominating Committee continues their work as they posted the job description and have officially begun the process of looking at candidates just this past week.
- The Christian Education Committee with the help of Rachel Vogado are putting together Sunday School options via Zoom (hopefully some of you were able to join for our virtual Gift Sunday this morning); they are also working on a "virtual" Youth Hangout using either Zoom or Google Hangout as well as developing home resources for parents and children for faith formation.
- Members of our Visitation Team and our Deacons are calling our older church members to check in and see what needs they may have as well as offer prayer. The Deacons have also been in contact with our mission partners in the community to see what the needs are; so far they have released almost \$4,000 dollars in relief to support our backpack program and Meals on Wheels. Many of our Deacons are also delivering meals to Seniors through Meals on Wheels. Other members of our church who serve on a team addressing childhood food insecurity have been crowd sourcing to fill needs in the community. And I know there's lots more going on!
- I have been filled with joy and gratitude to see the ways in which members of our church have stepped up to the plate during this difficult time. We will keep you posted on other opportunities as they arise. With that, let us worship together.

Sentences of Scripture

God summons us to wake up and see.

Light has come to lead us to all that is good.

God sees beyond our outward appearance.

God knows the intent of our hearts.

God listens to all who worship sincerely.

Let us now praise God with openness and obedience!

As children of God's light, we are called to do what is pleasing to the Lord: to participate in what is good and right and true, and expose what is unfruitful and evil. Knowing that we

turn from the light, we bring our confession to God, so that what is hidden in us becomes visible, and the shadows of our hearts may be illuminated by grace. Let us pray:

Prayer of Confession

Gracious God, we are people who still love darkness rather than light. We keep shameful deeds secret, but flaunt our occasional acts of virtue. We see ourselves as blameless, but pass judgment on others. We do not stand firmly enough with those who are vulnerable, but step back, protecting ourselves.

Forgive us, we pray. Bring us into your light that we may see ourselves rightly. Bring us into your light that we may know ourselves loved. Bring us into your light that we may live more fruitful lives. Keep raising us, we pray, from the deadness of sin, and shine upon us with your grace. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ, the light of the world. Amen.

Gatekeepers of Grace
John 9:1-41
By Rev. Lynne Keel
March 22, 2020

This morning's text comes from the gospel of John during Jesus' ministry. It is the narrative account of when Jesus healed a blind beggar, and it's a classic study of human behavior when confronted with the tragic and unexpected. The story is a perfect blend of politics, disbelief, divisiveness, and cynicism such that one is reminded that not much has changed in 2,000 years. This particular story spans 41 verses, each one of them essential to the narrative structure, and it moves quickly from one scene to the next with a rather large cast of characters. So if you have a bible handy, I encourage you to open and read along with me. We will be reading John 9:1-41; I invite you to read or listen now for the word of the Lord...

As [Jesus] walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. ²His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" ³Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. ⁴We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. ⁵As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." ⁶When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, ⁷saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see.

⁸The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?" ⁹Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him." He kept saying, "I am the man." ¹⁰But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" ¹¹He answered, "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." ¹²They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know."

¹³They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. ¹⁴Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. ¹⁵Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, "He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see." ¹⁶Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath." But others said, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" And they were divided. ¹⁷So they said again to the blind man, "What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened." He said, "He is a prophet." ¹⁸The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight ¹⁹and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" ²⁰His parents answered, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; ²¹but 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." ²²His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. ²³Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him." ²⁴So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, "Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner." ²⁵He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One

thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.”²⁶They said to him, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?”²⁷He answered them, “I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?”²⁸Then they reviled him, saying, “You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses.²⁹We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.”³⁰The man answered, “Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes.³¹We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will.³²Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind.³³If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.”³⁴They answered him, “You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?” And they drove him out.

³⁵Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?”³⁶He answered, “And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.”

³⁷Jesus said to him, “You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.”³⁸He said, “Lord, I believe.” And he worshiped him.

³⁹Jesus said, “I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.”⁴⁰Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, “Surely we are not blind, are we?”⁴¹Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.

This is the word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

“So who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” This is a classic theological question of what those in religious academic circles would call “theodicy.” The word theodicy comes from the Greek “Theos” meaning God and “dike” meaning justice. Literally, it means the defense of a good and loving God in the face of evil. Another way to put this would be to ask, “Why do bad things happen to good people” or “why does a loving and benevolent God allow evil and suffering to take place in the world?” Our disciples were trying to understand why was this man was born blind while most of us can see, and these are common questions posed by all of us each and every day.

The concept of theodicy is most famously explored in the book of Job. If you remember, Job was a faithful man, yet he had his whole life upended, his wealth stripped, his loved ones died and so on as a test of his faith. His friends came to see him and tried to comfort him, and they weren’t bad friends at first. But it wasn’t long before they felt compelled to make sense of the tragedy, and they started blaming him. Their theological understanding assumed that for something so bad to happen to Job, he must have really done something horrible. He must have deserved it.

And we often see people using those same theological assumptions when trying to understand and explain tragic events. In my pastoral career, I’ve seen a LOT of this. Family members of a man who smoked for 40 years said he got what he deserved when he was diagnosed with lung cancer. A teenager diagnosed with depression and an eating disorder was told that she wasn’t healing because she didn’t pray enough. The aunt of a woman diagnosed with terminal brain cancer told her niece that she was dying because she didn’t

believe in God. And just last week, an Israeli rabbi and an American Christian Pastor said that Coronavirus was divine punishment for allowing LGBTQ people exist.

Why do people say these things? Well, with all that goes wrong in the world, it seems that people rush to an explanation. There must be someone to blame. When we are overwhelmed with grief and human suffering, we carefully construct our worldviews and theological understandings thinking that will help ease our own suffering. We work hard to cram these horrible experiences into our neat tidy little boxes of justification. It has to be somebody's fault, or God must have willed this to happen to teach us a lesson. Surely, the world can't be this chaotic and random! God has a plan!

The down side of this line of thinking, however, is that in our anxiety and the pursuit of understanding the "whys" of this world, we end up objectifying those who are suffering. We play the blame game. We further victimize the victim. Somehow it must have been their fault or their parent's fault or their country's fault or even God's fault. We do whatever we have to do to alleviate our own suffering and confusion in trying to make sense of what is happening. It is our desperate attempt to control the uncontrollable.

And so was the case with our text this morning. Our blind man's miracle was perceived by the disciples and then quickly objectified. Did you notice that it wasn't his neighbors, the crowd or even the Pharisees who asked this first question about whose fault it was that the man was blind? No, it was our faithful disciples. They spent no time in empathy, considering what it must be like to be a blind man. They spent no time considering how they might assist the blind man. Their mental filters were turned off, and they blurted out, "Rabbi, whose sin caused this man's blindness?" The blind man was no longer a man in their eyes but instead an object lesson in theodicy.

In their own way, the Pharisees made the same accusations of the blind man's sinfulness. They refused to believe in the possibility of a miracle and tried to discredit that he was ever blind to begin with. They repeatedly questioned the man and then they questioned his family. Once again, they did not consider his humanity, his past suffering nor were they even willing to celebrate his newfound sight! They insisted that he must be some sort of case study to be used to further understand and justify their own preconceived notions. They were not interested in being challenged nor reworking their understandings of how the world operates and how God works through these scenarios.

And we all do this. We demand these tidy little explanations. I suspect the reason why is that if we can point the finger and develop an explanation for the world's suffering, then we create some comfortable distance between ourselves and those who hurt. We take control back of our world and think if we behave differently than those people, then maybe, just maybe it won't happen to us.

But, thankfully, Jesus does not let us get away with that. He quickly shifted the focus away from the blind man and back towards God. His response to the disciples was, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in

him.” Jesus shifted the focus away from causation, away from finger pointing and blame and instead moved to an act of love and mercy. Jesus did not try to explain the cause of his suffering; he only healed his suffering.

What if we did the same? What are the implications of seeing the blind man as an actual human being with a history, thoughts and feelings instead of another piece of evidence in building our carefully constructed worldviews? Now let me be clear. I’m not saying that we shouldn’t explore or analyze tragic circumstances to some degree. Some very important learning can take place in that process. Some tragedies can be avoided or if not avoided, they can be mitigated. Obviously, we are learning a lot right now about how to reduce the spread of viruses. Discussion and learning are important. But our speculations about the “how” and “why” of a tragic situation must never, ever precede the needs of the suffering who stand right before us, right now.

In order address the needs of the suffering, we must acknowledge each and every one of them as the precious children of God that they are. We must let their needs and sorrows penetrate and move our hearts to compassion. Let’s consider for a moment the blind man’s perspective: What would it have been like to be born blind in that day and time? Without the medical and educational resources that we have today, this man’s only option for survival was to be a beggar. It is all he ever knew. He was born into a prescribed role of powerlessness, a role of which everyone else in this story felt comfortable explaining away as being someone else’s fault or problem. Everyone except for Jesus Christ. When Jesus spit into the dirt and rubbed mud onto this man’s eyes, he not only gave him his sight, he gave him his power back. And that is threatening to the powers and principalities of this world.

Perhaps that’s why it never occurred to the disciples or the Pharisees that this man didn’t deserve to be in this vulnerable position. For them to consider that this blind man was also a human being, just like them, would upset the balance of power and the understanding of who is in charge, who was righteous and who was not. When we think we understand the whys and hows of the world, then we think we get to decide who deserves what. We effectively become Gatekeepers of Grace.

When Jesus leveled the playing field between the blind man and the rest of the world, we are reminded that the source of every good grace cannot be controlled by us. Everyone in this morning’s text was left to sit in the uncomfortable tension of why some were born blind and some were not, of why some are healed and some are not. We are reminded of our role to participate in healing, allowing God’s magnificent grace to shine through tragedy when it strikes.

Maybe constructing a clean explanation of the world’s suffering isn’t the point after all, however tempting that may be. Perhaps we were never meant to understand the “why” and “how” of the world. Perhaps the response we are called to make when we encounter the tragic is not to analyze and blame but instead to act with love, compassion and grace. Instead of distancing ourselves from the beggar we encounter on

on the street who we say is homeless because he or she is lazy and deserves it, what if we drew closer and saw ourselves in that person and fed and sheltered him or her instead? What if we stood in solidarity with the suffering instead of pushing them away?

Our community is really only beginning this walk into the unknown fall out of the Coronavirus. But what has become abundantly clear is that our society's vulnerable just became a lot more vulnerable. However vulnerable we feel right now, they are more so. We have no idea what the future holds at this point, but we do know that we can respond in faith generously as many in our congregation have already done. We can operate as instruments of grace rather than gatekeepers of grace.

Maybe it is a matter of blindly confessing our faith in the midst of a messy theology, when we don't understand. The blind man was badgered to account for his new vision. Episode after episode of questioning did not yield a satisfactory explanation for anyone, so the man finally replied, "I do not know whether [Jesus] is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." He does not account for why he was blind, he does not account for how his vision was restored but he does account for the fact that now he can, in fact, see. May it be so for all of us, Amen.

At this time of the worship service, we move to response. We have heard and received God's holy word, and our hearts are moved to give to our neighbors generously the grace upon grace that we have received from God. While we cannot pass the offering plate physically, we can share our generosity virtually. We ask you, where possible, to please keep making your offerings to God either through check sent through the mail or online on our website under the "Give" tab. We want to be able to continue to respond faithfully to the needs in our community and around our world as we move through this difficult time.

As we move to a time of prayer, I will offer a pause toward the end of the prayer, where you are invited to lift up your personal prayer requests either silently at home or you may share them here on Facebook. Let us pray together:

Prayers of the People & the Lord's Prayer

Faithful Shepherd, you have chosen us from birth, knowing our full potential to be your faithful followers. Look into our hearts and lead us from the blindness of self-interest to the clarity of the vision of the kingdom of God. Plant this vision in the eyes of those who lead us in our World, our Country, and our Community, so they will see themselves as You see them, and begin to shepherd their own flocks with integrity and compassion. Comfort all who suffer with physical illness, fear of sickness, or economic anxiety, and impart Your calming Spirit to those who give them care. Soothe the hearts of all who grieve for the loved ones who now live again in the delight of endless green pastures, dwelling in Your House forever.

Loving God, we *pause* in this moment to offer You our other heartfelt thanksgivings, intercessions, petitions, and memorials, silently or on Facebook... *add your own petitions – healthcare workers, grocery store workers*

O LORD our God, still the turbulent waters of our times and release us from the darkness we make for ourselves. Draw us to the table that You spread before us, where the bread and cup of your goodness and mercy overflows in this life and prepares us for the next. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord who taught us to pray together, **Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever, Amen.**

Benediction

Friends in Christ, let us love and serve the Lord above all. Check on your neighbors, practice kindness, extend grace and patience to one another. Take care of yourselves and take care of each other. And may the love of God, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you this day and forevermore. Amen.

The Peace of Christ be with you all.