

1 Samuel 16:1-3  
Ephesians 5:8-14  
John 9:1-41  
Psalm 23

Lent 5A  
St. Barnabas Bainbridge Island  
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This is a story about seeing and not seeing, about fear and freedom, about control and blame. On the face of it, it seems just another one of Jesus' miracles with the attendant lesson in being a good Christian. As he often does, Jesus heals an outcast, a beggar who has been blind from birth. The miracle making is described in much more detail than many of Jesus' miracles. So often he simply says something like '*Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.*' *Matt. 15:28*, or '*Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well.*' *Matt. 9:22*. But today's miracle is described in some detail. Jesus knelt down, spat on the ground and made mud with his saliva – I probably could have done without that detail - then he spread the mud on the man's eyes, and told him to "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam." The man did as Jesus said and after he'd washed, he returned to the community, no longer blind. Now you'd think the people would have been paying attention to the miracle that happened right before their eyes. You'd think there would have been celebration and joy and wonder. But no. Mostly there was anxiety. And confusion. Some people didn't even recognize the man because he was no longer blind. Some said he was a different person. Some treated him as though he wasn't a person at all. He was blindness.

We could call it human nature I suppose, or maybe the need to be able to make sense of things. Somebody who is no longer a nobody, is confusing and we don't like it. A nobody we were sure we knew, sure we could recognize, sure we could scapegoat - that nobody, turned somebody, is disturbing. Somebody who was blind suddenly being able to see turns out to be alarming and the source of all kinds of fretting, rather than a cause for great celebration, gratitude and praise. There's a name for that sort of behavior, you know. It's called status quo bias. People tend to want things to stay the way they are – good or bad – simply because they are familiar. When changes do occur, people tend to perceive them as a loss or detriment.<sup>1</sup> We don't like it when we can't explain things – so much so that we often turn to blaming ourselves or others. *Who sinned Jesus, this man or his parents?*

In the first century Mediterranean world, physical infirmity and other sorts of bad luck were thought to be punishment for sin. You hear it in the second commandment - *You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generations...* *Exodus 20:4-5*. We don't usually say that part

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.verywellmind.com/status-quo-bias-psychological-definition-4065385>

when we recite the 10 commandments. But the disciples knew their law and so they asked - *Who sinned Jesus, this man or his parents?* But Jesus didn't respond the way they expected him to.

I find it so interesting that the people immediately tried to figure out who to blame. I suppose we could call that human nature too. After all, blame is an excellent defense mechanism. It does a good job of helping to protect our sense of self-esteem. If we can blame someone or something, we don't have to take any responsibility for things gone wrong. Blame gives us a sense of control. If we can blame someone or something for things gone wrong, we feel that we have some control over things going wrong. Blame distracts us from fear. If we can blame someone or something, we don't need to be so afraid of the bad thing happening to us. He's blind because he was a bad sinner – or his parents were. But if that man's blindness wasn't a result of his sin, or the sin of his parents or grandparents, then what does that say about how God really works? Or doesn't work? If that man's blindness wasn't a result of sin, then that means it could happen to anyone. It could happen to me.

Jesus reminds us that life is fragile, that we cannot control it, that we are vulnerable and that it is only in our vulnerability that we can clearly see – not just what is right before our eyes, but the possibilities that could be, too. The people in this story had a hard time seeing things in new ways. Even after the man was cured of his blindness, they still called him the blind man, the man born blind, the man blind from birth. They identified him by his limitation, his blindness, even when that limitation no longer existed. The best they could do after he'd been healed, was to call him the man who had formerly been blind.

And what about us? How often do we define ourselves in terms of our limitations or our problems or our illnesses? What stories do we tell about our past as though they demonstrate our present and dictate our futures? What stories do we tell ourselves about ourselves that are no longer true?

Here's what I mean. A woman new to the church, we'll call her Jane, went to a church supper one night where everybody seemed welcoming and friendly. Jane felt quite at home. She sat down to supper and started talking with the woman next to her. We'll call her Betty. Betty began to talk, and the conversation quickly moved to the heartbreaking story of her husband abandoning her and their three children to marry the new, young priest at the church. Of course, this is NOT what Jane had hoped for that evening, but there you are. Betty was clearly in shock and while the whole thing felt a bit awkward, at least there was an opportunity to be a compassionate and present listener to someone in such distress. But as the conversation became inappropriately intense and inappropriately long, Jane began to understand that Betty's husband married the curate over 15 years before. What had felt so heartbreaking and shocking and new was a story nearly two decades old.<sup>2</sup> But it was the story Betty defined her life by and she would not give it up. She kept the story alive with everything that was in her, and even

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<sup>22</sup> Crafton, Barbara. Embracing Forgiveness disc 3.

though it was long over she kept the story and the suffering alive. And in doing that, she made sure she would never live into her future or even her present. She was committed to her past and that was where she would stay. In a strange way, it kept her safe. Truth be told, I think a lot of us have stories just as old and just as destructive, that we hold onto, too.

While all that may sound foolish, there is something in it I understand. Sometimes, when we let go of the suffering of the past, it can feel like betrayal. We think that if we don't remember, if we don't suffer, if we don't continue to live in the pain of the most deeply painful experiences of our lives, we're somehow betraying ourselves or others. But it isn't so. It really is ok for us to move on from unspeakable grief without betraying the one or the thing we grieve. We don't forget – that wouldn't be right. But we do pull all the goodness of what we've lost into ourselves and let that help us to love more and more.

None of this is to say that our history doesn't matter, of course it does. But when we can only think of ourselves as what we were, when we talk about ourselves only in terms of how things used to be, when we do that to others, we leave ourselves in the past, which means we cannot open ourselves to God's future. It means God's good works can't be revealed in us, just as they were revealed when Jesus restored the blind man's sight. Yes, in our vulnerability we've been hurt, we've lost people we love we've lost abilities or capacities or courage or even our sense of ourselves. But God wants to redeem all that, God will redeem all that if we will allow it. And the way to allow it is to surrender any illusion of control and let God's redeeming love be revealed in us. God didn't make that man blind so Jesus could make a miracle as proof of God's power. But God did redeem his blindness and turned even that to good.

We do need to be careful here – because quite frankly, the translators didn't do a very good job of translating this passage. Here's what we heard: *Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work.*

But this is the direct translation:

*Neither this man nor his parents sinned. In order that God's works might be revealed in him, we must work the works of him who sent me.* Do you hear how different that is from "this man was born blind SO that God's works could be revealed?" Someone who likely thought they were being helpful added that phrase. The point isn't that God made the man blind so Jesus could make a miracle and prove the power of God. The point is that Jesus sees the suffering and we're supposed to see it too, so that we can work God's works, so that we can do God's good work in the world.

The scholar who helped me properly understand that scripture passage is a man who is a double amputee. He had cancer as a high school student, and he tells a modern day version of this gospel story. The story culminates in someone saying to his mom "Don't you feel guilty that your son has cancer? If you had fed him the right diet with cancer-fighting antioxidants this wouldn't have happened." *Who sinned, Jesus?*

Yes, sometimes it's easier to blame someone or something for our circumstances than it is to look at the suffering, and help. It all comes back to the way we see things. Do we see through the eyes of fear or through the eyes of love? Do we see limitations, or do we see possibilities?

One of the many things Jesus seems to be telling us in this story is that we ought not to be distracted by things that don't really matter. That we need to see with the eyes of our hearts. That even though it sometimes feels like we're walking through the valley of the shadow of death, we need to know ourselves as God's own beloved, and from that identity look at what is happening around us. As it turns out, we need to look for the suffering so we can do God's good work of mitigating it, whether it be in our homes, our neighborhoods or the wider world. *Stop looking at the limitations, yours or anyone else's*, Jesus seems to be saying. We need to look for the possibilities, because that is the way we'll be able to see the future God is calling us into. Amen.