

5 May 2019

People, Not Ideas

John 9:1-7

Our reading today comes from the Gospel of John, chapter 9, verses 1-7:

9 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.

So let's dissect this story. Jesus is with his disciples in Jerusalem, the capital city and home of the temple, to which Jews from all Palestine go to worship. As in any pilgrimage center, there are beggars, counting on the good will of religious visitors. Jesus and his disciples come to a blind man, apparently well-known in Jerusalem as having been born without sight, and they stop to argue theology. Why was this man born blind?

To understand this question, we need to understand the disciples' presuppositions. At that time – as often today – people assumed that illness and disability were the result of sin, either a direct punishment by God or the natural consequences of evil. Either way, though, this was a widely accepted assumption in 1st century Judaism, and it had scriptural support. During the Exodus, when some rebelled against God's spokesman, Moses, they were swallowed up by the earth. When Aaron and Miriam did the same thing, they contracted leprosy. (They got better.) Many of the psalms start with this presupposition – “God, I'm sick! Please forgive me!” Now, it's worth pointing out that other scriptures reject this assumption that misfortune is always caused by sin, but for Jesus' disciples, that idea would have been a given.

But you see how a man born blind could challenge this presupposition? What could this man have possibly gotten up in *in utero* to deserve such a punishment? Or was it that God – being all-knowing – knew ahead of time that this man *was going to* do something awful, so he punished him in advance? Or was it not this man's sin at all? Maybe God was punishing his parents for something by giving them a blind son. Now, I hope that you're cringing at all these suggestions, but try to put yourself in the disciples' sandals. If you had started with the theological presupposition that all disabilities are punishments, you'd have to admit that a man born blind is a fascinating theological puzzle. Worth a paper, maybe. Or even a full theological symposium. Who knows? Maybe the debate could lead to a theological breakthrough or even, if things go well, a new theological *paradigm*!

So they ask Jesus, *Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?* And Jesus replies, “Neither. He was born the way he was so that the works of God could be revealed

in him.” Now some people, knowing the rest of the story, assume that Jesus is saying that the man was born blind in order to give Jesus a chance to do a dramatic healing. But that’s not he says, is it? “So that the works of God might be revealed in him” is a lot broader than one incident. In fact, it’s so broad that we could apply that purpose just as well to the disciples themselves. Or to us today. We were born as we are so that others might see God in us.

What Jesus does here is profound and revolutionary. Not only does he reject their question, but he rejects the presupposition behind it. This man’s blindness is not a mark of punishment; it’s a mark of who he is. And the way that relates to God has nothing to do with causation but rather that *who he is*, whoever that might be, should point people toward God. In a few words, Jesus eliminates the artificial distinction between this blind (and therefore supposedly sinful) man and the seeing (and therefore supposedly *less* sinful) disciples. They share the same humanity and the same purpose: to reveal God. Only then, having dismissed his disciples’ theologizing, does Jesus turn to the man, meeting him at the point of his deepest need, and heal him.

What we’re doing here today, and for the next few of weeks, is looking for the foundation stones of the community of faith. We live in a time of dramatic change, in our society as a whole and even more immediately in the United Methodist Church. It’s impossible to know exactly what our church landscape is going to look like in a couple of years, but what I want to think about this month is this: if the worst-case scenarios were to happen and our denomination collapse in rubble, *on what principles would we rebuild?* Where would be our priorities? Where would we start? Today, let me say this: we should not begin with theology, but with people.

That sounds good, and it’s easy enough to say, but this will be harder than you might think. From our start 500 years ago, we Protestant churches have defined ourselves by our doctrine, by the content of our faith statements, by the list of propositions we agree with. Lutherans, from the start, defined themselves by the doctrine of Grace. Reformed churches, like the Presbyterians, formed around the doctrine of Predestination, Baptists by their particular theology of baptism, Pentecostals by the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Even those of us, like Methodists, who don’t have a particular doctrine as our mascot have treated theology as our definition. Confirmation and New Member classes have for centuries centered on teaching our doctrines, as if being a Christian were a factor of holding the right ideas. This is simply how we have been conditioned to think. But is there anything – *anything* – in any story of Jesus that supports that notion? No. Jesus’ ministry was with people, not ideas.

Now, I’m not saying that we don’t need theology. We do. Jesus told us to love God with all our heart, soul, strength, and *mind*. So we need to ask questions and seek to understand God. That search for better understanding is what loving God with our minds means, if means anything at all. I’m not saying to stop doing theology. What I *am* saying, though, is that for too long we have defined ourselves solely by our answers to a set of standard questions, and it’s time to define ourselves differently. It’s time to define ourselves as Jesus did: by how we treat other people. Let our theology be built on our relationships instead of the other way around.

Let me suggest what that might look like. As you surely know, the specific issue that threatens the unity of the Methodists has to do with homosexuality. Now I have said before and will say again that I don't think our differences are really about that. Exclusion of homosexual people is just the costume that is put on by people who feel threatened by the rapid pace of change in our culture. If the issues related to homosexuality were magically all resolved tomorrow, another cultural issue would take its place the next day, and we would be on the verge of schism over that. But, since homosexuality is the face of our controversy today, I'll use that as an example. In a world where people come before theology, our priority in the way we do church would be to meet people where they are, treat them as we would wish to be treated, and tear down all artificial barriers between people. We would behave as Jesus did when he refused to accept the assumed division between that "sinful" blind man and those apparently-not-sinful disciples. The disciples saw blindness as a symbol of God's punishment; Jesus didn't see blindness at all. He saw a man who happened to be blind. In the same way, in a church that starts with people, we would not look at homosexuality but look instead at people, some of whom are gay. Sometimes people wonder why that is. "Why are some people gay?" Well, I'll tell you why. Some people are gay so that the works of God may be revealed in their lives. And – oh! hey! I just noticed something! – that's the same reason that other people are straight! We seem to all have the same reason for being who are.

To put it another way, in this world where people come before ideas, we would stop using gay and lesbian human beings as doctrine fodder. We would stop standing over them, like the disciples over the blind man, arguing the theological questions raised by their existence. And let me be clear: I'm talking to liberal theologians here, too. I don't care which side you're on, if you are arguing about homosexuality so as to prove that your view, your take on scripture, is right and that the views of the other side are wrong – then *stop it!* The works of God are not revealed in you when you're right. The works of God are revealed in you when you show love to God's children.

We should finish the story, though. After the man born blind is given his sight, he immediately gets into trouble. Religious leaders who hate Jesus pounce all over him, trying to prove that he wasn't ever really blind, or that maybe Jesus broke the Sabbath by putting mud on the man's eyes, or something. Can you imagine any things more depressing than to open your eyes for the first time in your life, and the first thing you see is a theologian attacking someone? But the man refuses to admit that Jesus is a sinner, and so they expel him from the synagogue. I read from verses 35-38: *Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, 'Do you believe in the Son of Man?' He answered, 'And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.' Jesus said to him, 'You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.' He said, 'Lord, I believe.'* Notice what the man believed in. It wasn't a doctrine. It was a person. Maybe when we understand that, when we think less about what we believe than about whom we trust, it will be easier for us to put people before ideas. It's time.

Final word: My New Zealand friends told me a story last week. They had been at a church in Dunedin, on the South Island, and one of the leaders at that church pointed out to them a member

across the room: “The one with the purple hair and no teeth.” I’m assuming there was only one. Then he told them her story. She had first shown up at the church to volunteer with a community feeding program that they ran, but she was prickly. She stared at them challengingly and said, “I’m an atheist, you know. Convert me!”

And the people of the church replied, “No. But you’re welcome to serve with us.” And so she did. Then one day, after about two years of serving alongside the people of St. John’s, she announced suddenly, “Well, you’ve gone and done it, anyway, haven’t you?” That’s what evangelism looks like when you’re not trying to convince someone to agree with your ideas, but just loving them. That’s when the works of God are revealed in your life. Amen.