

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling
First Presbyterian Church
March 22, 2020
Lent 4A
John 9:1-41

God of compassion, be close to those who are ill, afraid or in isolation. In their loneliness, be their consolation; in their anxiety, be their hope; in their darkness, be their light; through him who suffered alone on the cross, but reigns with you in glory, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

“Grace in the Wilderness”

Before we had ever heard the phrase “social distancing” or were forced to “shelter in place”, sociologists were concerned about the breakdown of community. The book “Bowling Alone”, published 20 years ago, brought to light the fact that people used to do things together, like go bowling, but don’t anymore . . . and this was long before the coronavirus. And the stats back that up. In the last quarter of the twentieth century, for example, American attendance at club meetings went down by 58 percent. Family dinners declined by 33 percent. And inviting friends to one’s home decreased by 45 percent.

This loss of community troubles sociologists, because communities with more isolation tend to feel less safe; people often have less stability when they’re isolated; and, as many are now finding, it makes one less happy. Maybe you also feel a little like I have this past week as our social isolation has grown exponentially, and are feeling more anxious, more concerned about people you can’t see face-to-face, and also feeling helpless as to what to do about it. Maybe you’re not sleeping very well or eating very well. All of these feelings and more are side-effects to being socially isolated.

In our Gospel reading for today, we meet a man blind from birth who Jesus heals, and he, too, is socially isolated, and the reactions from his neighbors, religious community, and parents don’t play out like they should.

First up we have the disciples. “Jesus,” the disciples ask when they encounter the blind man, “who sinned? This man or his parents?” In other words, who is to blame here? It wasn’t an unusual question in the 1st century. Everyone assumed

there was a link between suffering and sin. One wasn't just born blind. So his parents must have done something to cause the man to be blind. But Jesus assures the disciples that no one sinned. That there is no relationship between the man's condition and his sinfulness. God does not make people sick in order to punish them for wrongdoing.

Next, we have the neighbors. Is this the blind guy who used to sit and beg, they ask? Some say yes, others say no. The man says, "Hey, it's me." How'd you get your sight, they ask? This man named Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, told me to go and wash them, and now I can see, the blind man says.

Now, I don't know about you, but I find the neighbors' reaction troubling. Because here they've lived with this man all their lives, but they can't recognize him after he's healed. They don't know how to see him without his disability. It's as if to see him would be to recognize a common humanity, a bond, a kinship. And apparently, that would be scary.

The neighbors bring the man to the Pharisees, who ask him how he can now see, and so for the second time the man explains what happened. "Jesus put mud on my eyes, then I washed them, now I see," the man explains. But the Pharisees aren't buying it. They, too, are convinced the man's blindness is a result of his sinfulness.

Next up, we have the blind man's parents, who basically disown him. "We have no idea how he got his sight. Go ask him. He's of legal age." They can't even celebrate that their son, their very own son, can now see.

Everyone in the man's community fails him. Everyone. His neighbors, his faith community, and his parents. Everyone.

Why?

My theory? Good, old-fashioned, fear.

A fear so primal and so deep, it drives away all compassion, all empathy, all tenderness, and all sense of kinship. After all, if the man's blindness isn't a punishment for sin, then what does that mean about how the world works? Anyone might suffer from a disability, or face years of undeserved pain for no discernible reason, or get sick. Anyone. And that is a terrifying,

destabilizing version of reality that we're living through right now. And when people are that fearful, they say and do dumb things, like look for scapegoats. They look for people to blame, or look for answers where there aren't any, like the disciples, neighbors, and Pharisees did.

For the Pharisees and disciples of yesterday, and unfortunately for many people today, when something goes wrong there's just got to be a reason for it. Because there's got to be a reason for unexplained suffering. We don't want to believe that we live in a morally neutral universe. There's got to be more to it than just fate or chance.

Now, some of you may think "well, I don't believe that a person's suffering is a result of some horrible sin they committed." And that may very well be the case. But sometimes our beliefs are subtler than that. For example, years ago I knew a young woman who had lung cancer. The first question people asked was, "Did she smoke?" Because 37 year old women with 2 young kids don't get lung cancer because that's not right. So we try and pinpoint some action that caused her cancer, b/c we don't want to live in a morally neutral universe. The same analogy was used in the early days of AIDS – and unfortunately still is in some circles. "If they weren't drug users or promiscuous or gay, they wouldn't have AIDS," some people said; which was a subtle way of saying, "If they didn't sin, they wouldn't be suffering." This is why in the early days of AIDS it was hard to accept that hemophiliacs contracted the virus, b/c as some people said, they did nothing to deserve it. As if others did? Our more rational and enlightened minds may say that bad choices naturally lead to bad consequences.

But in today's story, Jesus could care less why the man is blind. The important question for Jesus isn't why, but how – how are you going to respond? And what we see is the community failing at answering the "how" question.

Friends, during this pandemic, let us not fail at answering the "how" question.

If you hear someone say that the coronavirus is a result of divine punishment, run as fast as you can from that person. What we're going through, and what the thousands of people who are sick are going through, is not something God has caused to happen. If you want to know the why, talk to an infectious disease specialist.

Our response as people of faith to this pandemic isn't one of explanation but one of witness. Our job is not to make what has happened rational or understandable, but is to witness to a God who loves us so abundantly that God would bring sight to the blind. Now please note: This is not an argument for exposing yourself or your community to greater threat of illness in the current setting. But it is to say that times of risk and isolation call for active advocacy, compassion, and allegiance to one another. Call your friends, family and neighbors. Volunteer to call church members. We want to call every member of the church, and we need your help. Practice social distancing. And if you are in an at-risk group, don't go out. We have volunteers ready and willing to run errands for you. Be smart. Do your part to flatten the curve. Try to remember that it's not about you; it's about others. This thing is real.

There have been many comparisons made between the coronavirus and the 1918 flu pandemic. Like the bumpy hills some foresee in the coming months, the 1918 pandemic hit America in 3 waves, and with each wave came a cycle of denial, devastation, and community response kicking into overdrive, followed by finger-pointing and blaming among leaders and the public.

One anthropologist wrote in an article in the Washington Post that while the 1918 pandemic brought out the best in some people, it brought out the worst in others. Sewing circles churned out gauze masks, but xenophobic conspiracy theories spread vicious rumors that nurses of German descent were deliberately infecting people. "Pandemics aren't just physical," the anthropologist wrote. "They bring with them an almost shadow pandemic of psychological and societal injuries as well."

In order to stave off what will surely become a blame and shame game, one professor tells a story to her students about a doctor named John Snow. Amid a cholera outbreak in mid-19th century London, as panicked residents fled one hard-hit neighborhood, Dr. Snow calmly entered the breach. He deduced that the source of 100s of deaths was a single contaminated water pump and persuaded the water authorities to remove the pump's handle – a strategy that ended the outbreak.

Controlling the covid-19 pandemic will take much more than a single water pump. But the story is a reminder of how powerful one simple act of one individual can be.

Friends, in this story we learn that the only person the blind man can trust is Jesus, and he is the one we can trust. God did not make this happen; if anything, God is in it with us. In our homes keeping us company and easing our anxiety; with the medical community as they fight this pandemic on the frontlines; with those who get sick; and with those who die, and all of their families. That's where God is.

As we go through what is surely going to be a grueling and long period in our country and our world, we can and must give witness to a God who heals and restores and brings sight to the blind. This is no time to declare that the church is closed. This the time to declare ourselves open – open to showing compassion and empathy so that when people look back they will declare that this, this, is the church's finest hour.

Amen.

Sources:

www.journeywithjesus.net, "Now I See" by Debie Thomas. Posted 15 March 2020

Feasting on the Word, Volume 2, Year A, Pastoral Perspective commentary on John 9:1-41

The Washington Post, "Coronavirus will radically alter the US", March 19, 2020, William Wan, Joel Achenbach, Carolyn Y. Johnson, and Ben Guarino

"Dear Working Preacher", Matt Skinner, Luther Seminary, March 22, 2020