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Fourth Sunday in Lent

Today's sermon is taken from the Gospel of John, chapter 9, verses 1-41.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen

A little girl was riding along on her bike when she bumped her head on a low-hanging branch on a tree. She ran into the house crying, "Mommy, Mommy, Joey hurt me!" Her mom looked up from what she was doing and she said patiently, "Sissy, Joey didn't hurt you! Joey's not even here. He went to the grocery store with your dad." The little girl got a startled look on her face. Then in a bewildered voice the little girl asked, "Does that mean stuff like this can happen on its own at any time with no one being at fault?" Then she added, "What a bummer."

Well, it is a bummer. Bad things can happen at any time to anyone, and sometimes there's no one to blame. In today's lesson from John's gospel Jesus' disciples encounter a man blind from birth. The disciples ask Jesus, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind? And there it is -- that question. Who is to blame for this man's misfortune? Somehow if we can just affix blame, we think it will somehow make the situation better. There will at least be some meaning to the event; maybe even a solution. If there's somebody to blame, it means there is a way of gaining control over life. If bad things just happen with no one to blame, then there's no control, and that is scary.

The blame game. It's been around since the Garden of Eden. "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" It's an absurd question, of course. How could a man born blind be responsible for his predicament? Did he sin in his mother's womb, kick his mother a little too hard perhaps? If you follow this line of thinking, you're left with only one viable conclusion: It must be the parents' fault. Can you imagine how hurtful this explanation would be to this man's parents? Not only would their precious son never be able to see, but it was somehow their fault. They had offended God some time in the past, maybe without even realizing it, and this was their punishment.

For most of us, this is an absurd line of thinking. It really makes God look like a second-rate deity. And yet there are many sincere Christian people who when something tragic happens in the life ask, "Did I somehow cause this? Is God punishing me for some transgression of which I am not even aware?" Of course, it depends on how you think

about God. Does God punish people for the merest transgression, even one that might be unconscious? Does God make little children suffer because their parents have somehow offended God?

Jesus' answer to his disciples' question is intriguing. "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus. "But this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in this life." What does that mean? How can an affliction, particularly one as debilitating as blindness, display the work of God?

Let's look for a few moments at the story of the gospel. First of all, we see Jesus heal this man born blind, and that's important. It is not God's will that this man or any man or woman, whoever they may be, be blind. Blindness comes from many sources; it might be the result of trauma or disease. In a man born blind, maybe damage of a gene was responsible; we don't know. However, we do know this: If you are blind, physically blind, you are not that way because God willed it. If you have cancer or some other adverse condition, it is not because God willed it. If you are going through a devastating time financially, it is not because willed it. God's will is always for wholeness and health. God's will is for your needs to be met, and that is why Jesus healed this man. Healing, I believe, is God's will.

This is so important for us to understand. If when we are going through a time of extreme heartache, and we insist on playing the blame game, we may be cutting ourselves off from the very power that can heal us. Notice how Jesus heals this man: According to this morning's gospel, he spits on the ground, he makes some mud with saliva and puts it on the man's eyes. Then he tells the man to go and wash in the pool of Siloam. Now, the blind man might have responded to Jesus' actions in many ways -- he could have said, "This is really dumb. How in the world could putting mud on my eyes really heal me? I'm not going to move one inch. It's ridiculous." That is how many of us might have responded, particularly if we had let our blindness defeat us and to make us bitter and cause us to give up on God. That's how this man could have responded. I can't help but believe that this man's healing was connected to the positive way that he responded to Jesus' command.

John indicates to us that the man immediately went to the pool, he washed in the pool, and he came home seeing. He responded in faith, and his faith was rewarded. We don't know why Jesus used this particular method of healing on this man. I have no doubt Jesus could have simply spoken, and the same result would have been accomplished. Maybe it was important to Jesus to see this man do his part by washing in the pool of Siloam.

However, here's what the healing of this man says to me: If you have some tragedy in your life or in the life of someone you love, believe that God's will is for healing. Look for that healing. Work for that healing. Never give up hope. Just as Jesus healed the man blind from birth, God's will is for all God's children to be well and strong. I believe

that's true of all of life. If you have a hurt of any kind or a need of any kind, whether it's physical or spiritual or mental or emotional or financial, or whatever it may be, don't sit around wondering who is to blame. Don't sit around feeling sorry for yourself. Focus on God's desire for healing. Do what you can to bring healing. Focus on it. Expect it. At least believe that God wants to heal your heart, your attitude, your feelings about your hurt or need. Put yourself in a frame of mind to receive whatever healing God may have for you.

And remember, God can use the most adverse circumstances to our best good. That's what St. Paul says to us in Romans 8, verse 28: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to God's purpose." God can use even the most adverse circumstances to bring a blessing to our life. In all things God works for the good of those who love him. That's a hard thing to remember when you are going through difficult times, but I know it's true. God can use any circumstance. When you are going through a difficult time, look for some way this can be used to God's glory. Let it make you better rather than make you bitter.

And that brings me to the final thing I want to say. The most tragic blindness, I think, is blindness of the heart. It's interesting -- this should have been the most joyful day in this man's life. He had been blind all his life, and then this man Jesus came by and did something quite remarkable. He took some dirt and some of his own saliva, and he made mud. And then he put the mud on the man's eyes and told him to wash in the pool of Siloam. So the man did as he was told, and then he came home able to see.

This is an extraordinary miracle. A man who had never seen anything before now had his vision. Can you imagine what that was like? Should not someone have thrown him a party? Well, his neighbors didn't. Some of them refused to believe that this was the same man who they had known. It didn't fit, if you will, their theology. They had never known a blind man who was healed, and they refused to accept him, and neither did the leaders of the Synagogue. In fact, they threatened to throw him out of the Synagogue even if he didn't recant his testimony that Jesus healed him. You see, his neighbors and the leaders in the Synagogue were blinder than this man had ever been. They were blind to who Jesus really was. They were blind to what God was doing in their midst. They let their own petty interests and experiences blind them to a richer understanding of the blessings God had in store for them. They weren't bad people; they were simply locked into a certain way to thinking about life and about God. They didn't, if you will, see the bigger picture.

You and I need to expand our thinking about our lives, to seek God's perspective on the things that happen to us, rather than trying to find someone to blame when something bad occurs in our life. We need to affirm that God's will is always for our best good. God wants us to be well. God wants to see that our needs are provided. In times of suffering, remind yourself, first of all, of that truth. God wants you -- you -- to be well.

Second, remind yourself that all works to the good for those who love God. Look for ways that God can use your present adversity for the good. Perhaps this experience will make you stronger; maybe this experience will make you more compassionate towards the struggle of others; and maybe this experience will draw you closer to God.

And finally, pray that God will help you see the bigger picture. Pray that you will sense God's will for your life. It may be that up to this point you too have been blind. Pray that God will help you see God's hand and God's plan and your place in it.

Amen

Transcribed by Phyllis K. Briggs