

First Presbyterian Church
John 9:1-31, “Who Sinned?”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 3/19/2023

When something bad goes wrong in our world or in our relationships,
we like to know who to blame.

Our minds are excellent at finding shortcut solutions
to the question, “Who did that?!?!”

In some families, who gets the blame is a pervading dynamic.

In others, it can be okay not to assign blame at every point.

For most of us, when we see something that isn't the way
we think it should be,
we want to know who messed it up.

Why is the mail carrier always late?

Whose fault is it that there's so much money in politics?

Who is to blame for childhood poverty?

Who decided to have Easter dinner at the wrong family member's house?

These questions (and endless others like them)

are considered by all of us nearly every day.

They are all variations on the question asked by the disciples
in today's scripture reading,

“Who sinned to cause this guy's blindness
– him or his parents?”

Who sinned to bring about what seems like an undesirable situation?

Is that a bad question to ask?

I would like to suggest that these questions can fit quite well

in our Lenten series, “Seeking: Honest questions for a deeper faith.”

If these questions are asked from a place of honesty and openness,

they can move us toward a better understanding of God,
our relationships, and ourselves.

This passage contains many questions – some of them more honest
than others.

Considered altogether, the questions asked in this passage
reveal the central truth that Christ is the one who illuminates
our seeking and questioning.

The first question comes from the disciples and I've already mentioned it:
“Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

Now, our modern sensibility says it's awful to think that sin is behind
something like congenital blindness!

Standing here in the 21st century with you,
I completely agree.

But things were not quite so clean cut back in ancient times.

It was typical to assign a spiritual cause to something unusual
in the physical world.

That's why it's important that the question is an honest one.

If we're honest and open in our seeking, God can guide us
from our initially misguided questions to more helpful ones.

Jesus' answer shows us that even though all sin causes suffering,
not all suffering is the result of sin.

There are things in the world that are just part of
the chaos that we don't understand.

God is able to be glorified even in the midst of conditions and realities
that are not God's hope or plan.

Jesus says, “As long as it is day (in other words, as long as we're alive)
we must do the works of the one who *sent* me.”

One of John's favorite words for Jesus is the *sent one*,
or as Dale Bruner suggests, “the Missionary.”

In v. 6, after Jesus explains the situation to the disciples,
he spits on the ground and makes some mud,
and puts it on the man's eyes.

Then he tells the guy to wash the mud off in a pool called, “Siloam.”

Now John interrupts the story just to tell us that the word
“Siloam” means “sent.” (*just like Jesus...*)

So Jesus uses this nearby water source to emphasize the divine purpose
behind his ministry and healing.

After the man washes in the pool he's able to see for the first time in his life.

The neighbors are sent into a tizzy. Is this the town beggar?

No, it couldn't be.

They ask him an honest pragmatic question of their own,

“How were your eyes opened?”

He tells them it was Jesus.

Now I have to point out that John tricks us with the way he tells the story,
because we don't learn until verse 13 that
the miracle occurs on the Sabbath.

Usually the Sabbath miracle stories begin with a line like,
“Now, it was the Sabbath.” But not this time.

John saves the information until the Pharisees are introduced.

The questions they ask are, naturally, centered around law-keeping.

Some Pharisees say, “This man is not from God
for he does not keep the Sabbath.”

Other Pharisees say, “Yeah, but the guy can see!”

And so they ask an honest theological question:

“How could a sinner restore sight?”

All the man who was once blind can say is,
“He's a prophet.”

If Jesus is from God then why wouldn't he follow the law of God?

Many of us today would say that Jesus *does* follow the Law of God,
but he doesn't follow the harsh interpretation of the Pharisees.

After all the discussion, the Pharisees are still not convinced.

So they get the guy's parents. This event is just mushrooming.

They ask honest historical questions:

“Is this your son? Was he always blind?

How is it that now he can see?”

The parents reply with what has since become the model response

for people thrust into the spotlight who do not want to play their hand
one way or the other.

“We are glad that our son can see, but we have no comment at this time as to the rumors regarding how this was accomplished.

It is our understanding that our son is of legal age and will speak for himself. Thank you.”

They kept it close to the vest because they were afraid to speak the truth.

They didn’t want to get kicked out of the synagogue and their whole social system that their livelihood and welfare depended on.

The parents are ready yet for honest questions and seeking God.

They just want to keep their simple lives as steady as possible.

When the Pharisees question the man who was healed a second time he says, “I’ve already told you and you didn’t listen.

Why do you want to hear it again?”

And then he delivers the most sarcastic line in the Bible, which is *not* an honest question:

“Oh, do you want to be his disciples, too?”

Predictably, the Pharisees don’t take it well.

The Pharisees affirm their loyalty to Moses and insult Jesus as being a nobody from nowheresville.

The man who was healed replies, “**Now that is remarkable.**

You don’t know where he comes from...but he opened my eyes.”

[PAUSE]

We’ve encountered a number of questions in this passage.

What are the honest questions that you ask in your heart about what God has done ... or what God seems to have left undone?

Some questions are never answered to our satisfaction.

But honest, seeking questions, even if not fully answered, can still be used by God to point us to the light of Jesus.

Jesus is the light, who enables the whole world to really see.

The disciples do not yet understand this,
so they don't see the blind man in the light of Jesus.
They are in the dark about where his blindness comes from.

The neighbors of the man do not yet understand this,
so they are in the dark regarding the source
or even the potential for this man's healing.

The Pharisees do not yet understand this,
so they are in the dark about Jesus
who is the Lord of the Sabbath
and embodies fulfillment of the Law.

The parents of the man do not understand this,
so they speak in guarded tones to those who inquire.
They are in the dark that they have nothing to fear
and much to gain by acknowledging Jesus.

In the end, there is one person...only one person in the story
who understands that Jesus is *the light of the world*.
This person was given sight to the eyes of his body,
and the eyes of his spirit as well.

In v. 38 the man who was born blind encounters Jesus again and says,
"Lord, I believe." And he worshipped him.

We truth seekers should ask our honest questions about faith and the world.
Don't hold back. Ask hard questions that might seem irreverent or wrong.
As we ask them, let us remember that Jesus is the light who illumines
our questions, our lives, and the world around us.

The man born blind said, "All I know is that I can see."

When my head begins to swirl with questions
about perplexing problems in my life and in the world,
this passage reminds me to look at the fruit
of what Jesus has done in my life and others' lives.

All I know is that I've been made free.

All I know is that following Jesus has pointed me toward life
when my own instincts were taking me toward death.

So thanks be to God: the light of the world came to us in Jesus of Nazareth,
and that light continues to shine on all who seek the truth.