

Fourth Sunday of Lent (Year A) – John 9:1-41
St Andrew's Episcopal Church - Sedona, AZ

“Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents?”

Who Sinned?

Who sinned? Isn't that question a typical example of human nature? Something happens that we can't wrap our heads around, so we resort to the blame-shame game. In the back of our minds we may think, “that person must have done something wrong to deserve that.” And with that passing thought another step is taken toward the black hole of judgmental criticism. Not only do we try to drag the apparent “victim” into our negative thought process, but we ourselves get lured into the darkness of how we think life should be. As my friend Betty says, “Sometimes we come up with so many ‘shoulds’ about other peoples’ lives, that we end up ‘shoulding’ on ourselves.”

Certainly, most of us want to learn and grow from our mistakes through critical reflection and behavior modification. But life has taught us that creation is filled with things that don't meet human-imposed standards of perfection, and will never be “fixed” by what we do or say. Life is so much more than what we see, because - more often than not - we see only what we want to see, or we see what we have been trained to see, or we see only what we expect to see.

When the disciples ask, “Rabbi, who sinned,” Jesus responds to their honest, but socially engrained question with an unexpected answer. “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.” Now in recent years we have all heard extremely simplistic and ungracious interpretations of that Scripture passage at some of the most painful times of human suffering.

The hurtful and unhelpful comments that followed Hurricane Katrina and earthquakes in Haiti blamed the natural disasters on the sinfulness of the victims and made God out to be an angry, vengeful, and wrathful parent figure.

The hurtful and unhelpful comments about crime victims – “He was in the wrong place at the wrong time; She shouldn’t have been wearing that kind of dress; They were hanging out with the wrong kind of people.” - those criticisms only serve to deflect attention away from broken social systems that perpetuate cultures of racism, gender bias, and xenophobia.

The blaming and shaming of people living with AIDS, or cancer, or any other medical condition leaves little space for God’s mercy and grace to heal not those coping with illnesses, but those coping with the sickness of their judgmental criticisms.

The blaming and shaming only serves to further harden the hearts of those who resist letting God’s love transform their perspective of the situation, and see life in a new light.

From a 21st century perspective, we might consider the hardening of hearts to be protective devices that shield us from feelings of vulnerability and frustration. Or that our judgmental criticisms are influenced by implicit biases – conscious and unconscious attitudes or socialized stereotypes.

But the light of Christ is not limited to 21st century psycho-social evaluations or first century human interpretations of religious doctrine. And the love of God is not used to glorify Godself in those whom we deem broken by their disability, illness, other prejudiced social norms. God's works are revealed through the brokenness of each of our lives at all times and in all places. God's works are revealed when Jesus breaks open our hardened hearts and myopic criticisms to bring healing and wholeness and new life. God's works are revealed when we recognize and accept God's abiding love and abundant grace in our lives and in our relationships with each other. For the man who was blind and can now see - his life has been transformed. But for the bystanders who could see, they are blind not only to this man's transformation and but to the healing power of God's abundant love.

Last week I saw the movie, "The Shack." Now I realize that some of you have not read the book, or seen the movie, so I'm not going to spoil the message by what I'm about to say. At a very basic level, "The Shack" attempts to respond to the question that all of us ask at some point in our lives: "Why do bad things happen to good people?" The movie offers viewers an

opportunity to wrestle with our capacity to be transformed by the Light of Christ while engaging with the darkness of our shadow selves – those negative ways of thinking and being that separate us from human love and Divine love. The situation that draws a family into darkness and light is centered on the evil act of a child abduction and murder. The pain and suffering surrounding such an unconscionable act threatens to tear apart the family and propels the father into a deep crisis of faith. While I can't imagine what it must be like to lose a family member to such a horrendous act, I imagine that most of us have chosen to walk with God through the darkness of a painful situation with the hope and promise of new life. The father in the movie had to give up blaming himself or others for what happened. He had to give up the engrained behavior of placing himself in the judgment seat and criticizing God and humanity for the loss of his daughter. He had to choose a different way of being with God, himself and his family for his life and their lives to be healed by love.

Losing a child or a grandchild under any circumstances is probably one of the most painful experiences imaginable. Having almost lost my daughter in a roll over car accident about six years ago, I know the terror, and the gratitude, and the grace that accompanied me and my daughter through that traumatic event. She was coming home from college to be with me and the rest of our family during my Dad's final days of hospice care. By the grace of

God, my daughter walked away from that accident with barely a scratch even though her car was totaled.

Although both of us were experiencing various levels of shock, my coping mechanism to deal with that accident and the possibility of losing my daughter and my father during the same week was to rest in God's peace. My coping mechanism was to be thankful for the blessings of my daughter's continuing life, and for the fullness and longevity of my father's life. In that situation, my coping mechanism was shaped by faith, hope, and love rather than blame or shame or guilt. I can't predict how I might feel or behave if a tragic situation were to happen to my family in the future. I can only hope that my coping mechanism will be shaped by my faith and my community's faith in the transformative power of God's abundant love.

Rather than asking who sinned or whose fault it was that life isn't happening the way it we expect it to, I pray that we may have the courage and faith to step through times of darkness and into new possibilities for life promised to all of us by God, our Creator of Light and Life.

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