

Part 1: The Gift

Psalm 146

John 9:1-12

3/8/2020

This sermon is the first of a three-part sermon. The second “act” will follow in one week. In two weeks, we will take a diversion for a wonderful celebration of our new birth as Christians. Then we will conclude March with the final sermon in this series. I urge you over the next few weeks to read John 9. The three sermons cover this chapter.

He was sitting in the same spot where he always sat. Rain or shine. Warm or cold. Seven days a week. Work for everyone else was prohibited on the Sabbath, but the beggars were tolerated so the almsgivers could make donations. Besides no one respected what they did as work.

There was a definite pecking order to the begging spots in the city. Those in the best spots had been there the longest or had friends that looked after them. He didn’t have the best spot, but he managed to stake out a decent corner by persistence. He did alright as a beggar by chatting up those who came by to give him alms. At the end of the day, one of his parents would come to get him. Actually, they come to get his money and use it as they saw fit. After all, they had to take care of him instead of him caring for them, as expected.

He was born blind. He relied on his other senses, particularly on his hearing and a sharp sense of direction to survive. From his spot he heard the news from out of town travelers, local rumors, business deals being struck, and the rumblings of the religious leaders. Plenty of talk about some new teacher on the scene. Had the religious leaders perturbed. This fellow, Jesus of Nazareth, was causing quite a stir.

This Jesus preached some of the same things that the other rabbis taught. Love God. Love neighbor. Practice righteous behavior. The problem was this Jesus hadn’t been taught by a respected and learned rabbi. This rankled many of the religious leaders. And from time to time Jesus made some audacious claims.

Because it was the Sabbath, there were no traders, no animals loaded with goods for the market. All foot traffic. He sat on his corner and shouted loudly trying to attract the attention of those passing by. “God will show you great mercy, if you show mercy to a man born blind.” “God loves those who care for others.” “Take pity on me and my plight.”

The coins rang in his basket and the baskets of the other beggars around him. Passers are sure that God loved them for the gifts they have bestowed this day upon on those less fortunate. The beggar’s sharp ears perk up as he hears a large group approaching. The group stops in front of where he sits and he hears the following question.

“Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

We might find that to be a rude question. But this blind beggar was used to this kind of question. Often the religious teachers and their students would move through the crowd of beggars using the various afflictions as a starting point for a conversation. The beggars learned long ago not to take offense. In fact, being friendly and receptive and humble, even if it all was an act, usually helped get a few extra coins from the teacher and his students.

The rabbi didn't bother debating with the disciples either of the two possibilities they raised. He didn't spend time on the theology of sin and punishment. Instead he said, "No one sinned. He was born blind so God could work through him and reveal more of God."

The answer might make us uncomfortable, perhaps even more uncomfortable than the original question, but the story will not wait for our discomfort to subside. No, the rabbi is moving and doing. He moves closer to the blind beggar. The beggar strains his ears, listening for the familiar plink of coins in his basket. Instead he realizes that the teacher was squatting in front of him!

"We have to do God's work while it's still daytime. Night is coming. Then no one will be able to work. I'm here and I am the light of the world." said the rabbi. The beggar's heart jumps as he realizes the teacher squatting in front of him is none other than the Jesus that everyone has been talking about. This Jesus has the habit of saying incredibly beautiful and outlandish things like, "I am the light of the world."

He hears Jesus spit and hears the rubbing of fingers on the ground in front of him. Then he feels Jesus' hands moving across his face and Jesus' fingers smearing something across his sightless eyes. "Go to the pool of Siloam and wash."

He forgets his basket, forgets his collected coins, forgets everything! His chest burned strong with a desire to obey the command from Jesus. He jumps to his feet, finds the wall of the building behind him. He could navigate to the pool – it was close by and near the path he usually traveled each day. He moves as fast as he could, far faster than a blind man should try to move in a crowded street. He ran into a number of people, knocked down a few and got knocked down by more than a few. Most thought him a mad man, especially given the mud caked on his face and his tattered clothing.

The beggar forges on, finally arriving at the pool. He falls on his knees and plunges his face into the pool. He scrubs the mud away from his eyes. As he did so, sensations coursed through his face that he has never experienced before. He lifts his head from the pool, opens his eyes and is overwhelmed by light. His eyes tried to focus, but they water and hurt. His mind struggles to deal with input that it has never experienced before, as he takes in images of the world that he has never, ever seen. It was too much. He sank to his knees while his mind and body try to take it all in.

Not knowing what else to do he struggles back to his feet finally and sets out to return to his spot among the beggars. The journey is quite challenging, with this new sense he has never

used before. His balance is off. The sights of people overwhelm him. He finds himself closing his eyes on the return trip, just to check his bearings.

He arrives and settles back into his spot. His fellow sighted beggars look at him with amazement – by the way he is moving and by the changed appearance of his eyes they can tell that he has been given the gift of sight.

We await the congratulations, the shared joy, the laughter. We are waiting for a celebration, a beggar party that rocks the city. But it never comes. It starts as muttering. “You can see. You don’t need to beg. Go home. Get a job. I get his spot. No, I get his spot.” The formerly blind beggar realizes that not only does he have his sight but he has now lost his livelihood. Before the other beggars do him physical harm, he rouses himself, leaves his money from the day for others to fight over, and heads for home.

He never makes it that far. As he enters the neighborhood where he lives, he meets some of his neighbors. They recognize him and stop him, wondering why he is home so early in the day. Then they realize that he can see.

“Look he has his sight. No, no, this must be a relative that looks like the blind beggar. This can’t be the neighborhood’s blind, beggar.”

“It’s me. It’s really me,” the formerly blind man says.

“If you are the blind beggar, then why can you see?”

The man recounted his story telling them about his meeting Jesus and the mud and instructions to go and wash.

“So where is Jesus, now?”

“I don’t know.”

And our first act concludes.

The beggar, born blind can now see. And yet despite this amazing happening there is little sense of joy to our story. The works of God performed in our world of darkness are so surprising, so out of sync with the values of the world that they are not always met with applause and appreciation. God’s works upset the social order like putting beggars out of business. And our beggar has physical sight, but he still does not know Jesus. His quest, his search will continue.

Is this a story about healing? Well, yes, but John weaves much into the fabric. The healing we need goes much deeper than just our physical bodies. Like the beggar we spend our lives begging for scraps when God would open our eyes so we can get up and go out into the world.

And the healing we need isn't just personal. Our society, our world is also filled with darkness and blindness. Miracles that should bring joy are often greeted with skepticism and anger.

Where do our eyes need to be opened? Where is our blindness so deep that it's as though we have been blind from birth? Where is there blindness in our community? What miracles of healing are happening that we are quick to disbelieve? What are we holding that is blinding us? What healing is Jesus ready to perform in our lives? What healing might we want to resist, because finally seeing the world like Jesus sees it is going to disrupt our lives so deeply?

Perhaps we need to begin with the disciples' question today. What question do we ask that shows that we have it all wrong? What judgements about others are quick and show our own blindness?

Why was this person born blind Jesus – who is the real sinner? But Jesus isn't really interested in debating who is the greater sinner, just on spreading healing mud.

Why did this person become a drug addict Jesus – who is to blame? But Jesus isn't interested in sorting out those details today, just in providing the addict enough support to get treatment.

Why does that mother with three children fill her shopping card with so much junk food Jesus – where did she learn that bad habit? But Jesus is more interested in talking to the woman and learning the names of the three children.

Why does this young man have so many tattoos and piercings Jesus – how much money has he wasted on that? But Jesus is more interested in hearing the story behind the picture of the hawk and telling him the colors are amazing.

When the "why" questions about others arise, Jesus invites us instead to get to know someone else. It's a chance to recognize our own blindness and have Jesus open our eyes to those Jesus wants us to love. It's a chance to give the kind of gift Jesus gave – the gift of touching another person. Amen.