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John 9:1-41/Lent 5A

“Seeking: Who Sinned?”

I’m a big believer that when it comes to one’s religious life and journey of faith, one needs to ask questions. Way back when I was in high school, I learned from my minister that if you never ask any questions, you never learn more than what your teacher teaches you. So ask questions, because when we do we grow in our faith and become more mature believers.

This, of course, is not a very popular mindsight among fundamentalists. For them, questions are a sign of a lack of faith and belief. There should be no questions if you’re a believer, fundamentalists maintain. It’s the old bumper sticker theology of “God said it, I believe it, that settles it.”

But that’s not only bad theology, it’s not Biblical either. Scripture is full of people asking questions. Scripture is full of faithful people asking questions. So there’s nothing wrong with asking questions.

But there are bad questions. And today, in this very long, very involved story about the man born blind, we have quite a few of them.

“Teacher, who sinned?” It’s the first question the disciples ask after Jesus sees the man who was born blind. Who sinned, they want to know. There’s no trickery involved here, they’re just curious and want to know who is responsible for the man’s lack of sight. It wasn’t unusual in the 1st century to assume there was a link between someone’s suffering and sin. So the disciples ask: “Rabbi, who sinned so that he was born blind, this man or his parents?”

But it’s a bad question, and not a faithful one. God does not cause bad things to happen to people in order to punish them for wrongdoing. To step away from someone’s suffering because we assume it’s divinely ordained, is not righteous. In fact, it’s reprehensible. So while Jesus heals the man, he tells the disciples that the man wasn’t born blind because of something that he or his parents did; there’s no harmful action or sinful person involved, so there’s no need to find fault or pass blame.

Like the disciples and for many of the same reasons, we, too, look for someone to blame when something doesn't go according to plan. So I guess it's not all that surprising that this would be hard for the disciples to take in. We're all attached to our assumptions; we all need some sense of certainty about how the world works, and we don't take kindly to having those certainties challenged. Add to that the boost in our psychological security of presuming we're right, and the disruption is shocking. We trust in the way things are, with extra credit given if we can imagine we have influence over it. We too, can be prone to viewing one another through a one-dimensional lens, and when that happens we start down a path toward misplaced questions and actions based on mistaken assumptions.

But what Jesus seems to suggest here is that instead of asking who is to blame, the disciples should ask who is to praise. In other words, they ask a bad question. Rather than ask, "Whose fault is it?" the disciples could have asked, should have asked, "How can we heal and help?" How can we, too, bring sight to those who cannot see?" But they didn't. Instead, they played the blame game. This isn't to say people shouldn't be held accountable for their actions; they should. But in this case, we're talking about a person whom ironically, the disciples don't see at all. They only see his condition, so their blindness led them to ask the wrong questions.

Can you imagine how different the story would be if the disciples had asked different questions? If they had asked "Whom can we praise? Whom can we thank for this amazing thing that's just happened? How can we, too, bring sight to those who cannot see?"

The story should cause all of us to consider what difference it would make in our lives if we asked different questions, or different questions were asked of us?

Next up we have the man's neighbors, who no longer recognize him now that he can see. "Is this the same man who used to sit and beg?" they ask. When he verifies that yes, he's the same man who used to be blind and beg, the neighbors ask "How are you now able to see?" Now, I'll give the neighbors the benefit of the doubt that their question was a natural reaction to what they're witnessing. What's troubling is that instead of celebrating with the man, they take him straight to the Pharisees to get to the bottom of what is going on because something must be wrong. Giving sight to the blind has totally disrupted their

opinion of how things ought to happen. It's almost as if once the man's vision grew stronger, other people's vision grew weaker.

So they take the man to the religious leaders, and the religious leaders immediately get defensive. "How did this happen?" they asked. Again, not "Wow! That's amazing! How can we heal and help?" Or, "What do you see? What's it like to see after all these years?" But, "How did this happen?" Now I don't know if you've ever been asked a question like that; chances are you have; but a question like that immediately puts someone on the defensive. For most people, it doesn't invite conversation.

But the newly sighted man is so excited about what's happened to him and wants to tell everyone about how it happened to him, that he proceeds to tell the religious leaders about Jesus, the mud, and the pool. But they don't buy it. So . . .

- Instead of allowing his healing and his transformation to also transform them, and even heal them by showing them what and whom they had not been seeing; they got mad about it.
- Instead of being absolutely blown away by the fact they now had this fresh invitation to learn how their God is a God who both sees and claims everyone, who does not rush by or ignore anyone, especially those others render invisible or voiceless; they got mad about it.
- Instead of being awed by the way Jesus had restored that man back into being the primary actor in his own life; they got mad about it.
- Instead of letting his testimony help them to see God's grace even more clearly and to grow their own faith even more deeply; they got mad about it.
- Instead of reactions of joy and surprise and awe that could have wrenched open their hearts more widely, they got mad about it.

But why? Why does the community feel such an urgent need to be on the defensive? I wonder if the core reason is fear. A fear so primal and 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 get sick, or suffer from a disability, or face years of undeserved pain and suffering for no discernible reason whatsoever. That wouldn't be fair — would it? That would be a version of reality the good

religious folks can't control. A terrifying, destabilizing version. Who among us can bear to surrender the illusion of control?

Not many people, which is why we so often ask the wrong questions – questions that make assumptions and presume answers and shut down conversations instead of inviting them. But a different question, or even a different way of asking the same question, like “That’s amazing! Tell me more about how this happened?” would have helped the community not only see the healed man; it also would have helped them see God’s love and power at work in their midst.

But that doesn’t happen because the wrong question was asked. Friends, no one in the story rejoices when the man is healed. No one – not even the man’s parents — expresses joy, or wonder, or gratitude, or awe. No one says, “I’m so happy for you!” or asks, “What’s it like to see for the first time? Does the sunlight hurt your eyes? What are you excited to look at first?”

Instead, the community responds with contempt. (And) its need to preserve its own sense of righteousness trumps celebrating a fellow human being’s restoration to life. That’s so sad.

An Israeli poet by the name of Yehuda Amichai wrote the poem “The Place Where We Are Right.” It captures much of what is at the heart of today’s story:

*From the place where we are right
Flowers will never grow
In the spring.*

*The place where we are right
Is hard and trampled
Like a yard.*

*But doubts and loves
Dig up the world
Like a mole, a plow.
And a whisper will be heard in the place
Where the ruined
House once stood.*

“The place where we are right,” the poem says, is “hard and trampled like a yard.” Ouch. Hard and cynical. Hard and suspicious. Hard . . . and stingy.

Friends, wrong questions get in our way. Wrong questions get in the way of us fully seeing another person.

Imagine how different the story would have gone had different questions been asked.

The only one in our story – the only one who truly sees – is the man born blind. Oh, the irony in that. All the others lose their sight along the way. Unlike the others, the blind man sees Jesus wholly and purely because he has no preconceptions, and the spiritual ground he stands on is soft and supple. So he is able to see God as God is. “Doubts and loves dig up the world, like a mole, like a plow,” the poet says. They allow the whispers of God’s Spirit to bring forth new life.

Whether we want to acknowledge it or not and whether we even consciously recognize it or not, the questions we ask either allow the ground we stand on to remain pliable or they cause us to harden our stance, which can lead to a refusal to grow and change.

So what questions will you ask? Will you ask questions that invite conversation, and promote healing and wholeness? Or will you ask questions that shut down a conversation, so we don’t have to change anything? So we can go on living with the order we think the world should maintain so people are kept in their place.

I wonder what this story would look like had better questions been asked. What if the neighbors had instead asked the man, “How do you feel?” What if the man had asked the crowd, “What are you afraid of?” What if the Pharisees had asked one another, “What if it’s time to change?”

This story invites all of us to reimagine how the world could be, or how our relationships with others could be if different questions are asked with gentle curiosity and compassion leading the way. So let us reimagine how we might ask better questions so that we can see beyond the differences we have with others.

As the old hymn sings:

Open my eyes that I may see,

*Glimpses of truth though hast for me.
Place in my hands the wonderful key,
That shall unclasp and set me free.*

Amen.

Sources:

Journey with Jesus, Debie Thomas, "Now I See", March 15, 2020

Sanctified Art, commentary on John 9:1-41

Shannon Kershner, "The Man Born Blind," February 26, 2017