



First United Church of Oak Park

Loaded Questions

John 9

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It was a busy time of year in Jerusalem, a festival time, with great crowds, meaning everyone was packed together — pressing in shoulder to shoulder, thigh to thigh, swept in from all over the country. As Jesus and the disciples pushed through the mass of humanity crowded into city streets, one man caught the attention of the disciples. He was a beggar, and though there were many beggars in Jerusalem, just by looking at the man, the disciples could tell that he had been born blind. This made him one of the most vulnerable people in the world.

Who knows how they could tell he was blind? Perhaps something about the way his eyes looked, or perhaps it was the way the man moved his body, leading with his ears, tracking every minute sound of the street, every footfall and wagon groan, every animal noise and child's squeal noticed and catalogued, blended into the soundscape of the city making up the world he had known all his life.

And as the disciples approached this vulnerable man on the street, the Disciples asked Jesus a question: Rabbi — who sinned so that this man should be blind? Is this blindness, this disease, this illness, is it because he a sinner, or is it because his parents were sinners?

Who is to blame? Why do some people suffer more misfortune than others? Why do some people get sick and get pushed out from the center of beloved community, leaving them stuck on the outside ... or stuck on the inside? This vulnerable man, whose sin is to blame for this predicament?

As heartless as that sounds, the disciples are reacting to a dispute that does exist within the pages of scripture itself. The disciples are

asking Jesus to resolve a dispute and explain a seeming contradiction between the book of Exodus and the book of Ezekiel. Let me explain.

In Exodus, as a part of the Ten Commandments no less, Moses himself declares that God is a jealous God executing punishment not only on those who sin, but also on their children. So if a person is sick, maybe they sinned or maybe it was their parents who sinned.

The prophet Ezekiel, however, totally rejects this idea. It isn't fair, Ezekiel declares, that a person should suffer because of sins their parents committed. No, the suffering a person experiences must be due to their own actions, their own sinfulness — theirs and theirs alone. Fair is fair, declares the prophet, if my father sucks on a lemon, I don't have to pucker up.

That's the crux of the theological dispute that the disciples drop in Jesus' lap. With a real live human being sitting before them as exhibit A, the disciples ask Jesus for a ruling on Moses vs. Ezekiel. Regarding this vulnerable man's health and life, they ask: Who is the sinner? Is it this man or his parents? Who is to blame for this sickness?

Jesus turns this around so fast their heads must have snapped back — “No one sinned, not this man nor his parents. This man was born to make manifest the works of God.” That he is not well, that he is suffering in his body — that is not a sign of sin or moral failure. He is a human being, the very site and means of God's most favored method for working wonders in the world. “No one sinned, not this man or his parents. He was born to make manifest the works of God.” Jesus stopped the discussion of who was to blame, stopped and cared for the man, cared for one of the most vulnerable.

This is inextricably bound up in the Christian faith, these two things. We are all of us born to make manifest the works of God — and we are to care for the vulnerable.

To say along with the ancient creeds that Jesus Christ is God, this allows us to remember we are followers of a God who has a human body — God, with flesh and bone and hearts and lungs and immune system and eating and drinking and living and dying. The human body

is good enough and holy enough and beautiful enough to be the site of God's own being. And it is not only healthy bodies, or young bodies, or the bodies of those from a certain nation or of a certain color, or strong bodies. As Christians we know that all bodies are good, and to honor all means that we must protect the vulnerable. The last must be first, and the first must be last.

This is easy to forget. Even the Disciples forgot and they were walking beside God enfleshed. It is easy to forget, and it is easy to quickly turn back to blame and fear when we are confronted with sickness.

You can see where I'm going with this. In the coming days, everyone in the world will have a chance to choose. Shall we seek to blame one another — dithering on the question: Who sinned? Who is to blame for how we got here? Shall we blame — or shall we seek to care for one another?

It is the realm of God that we must live in now, when the last are first, the first last. The healthy must serve the sick, the young must serve the aged, the wealthy must serve the poor. It is an upside-down realm where to care for one another, paradoxically, means to stay away. To give one another distance and time. To give the vulnerable first and best place. And in caring for one another, we create that which cannot be created except by the power of God. Time. Time to fight, not our neighbors, but our true foe.

A virus cannot define a person, a virus cannot degrade them, a virus is just a microscopic organism, one that we are learning to master and that we will master because we are children of the almighty who can split the very atoms of the universe if we so choose. We can rewrite the book of destiny scribed on our DNA. We have built towers that would make Babel seem like tinker toys. We can peer into the farthest depths of space and squint our way to understanding the tiniest particles.

We will master this. All we need is time. And the gift of time — that can be bought at a price anyone can afford. Time is a commodity that can be created only by the power of God, the power of God as it made manifest in caring for one another.