

TRUE BLINDNESS, TRUE SIGHT

John 9:1-16, 24-41

It was a terrible experience. It was a profoundly rich experience. I was on my way to Montreal exactly six years ago this time, but it feels like yesterday. My cousin, Anne, 53 years old, had died. She had been struggling with cancer, and it was a pretty awful experience until the end. She was fortunate to die at home, but her husband had left work to care for her full-time, and her little children were shuttled between grandparents, family and friends through it all. Ann was a vivacious, driven, generous and gracious person who was the key organizer for all family events, hosting everyone and connecting with everyone. My family in Montreal has still not recovered from the huge hole she's left behind.

But it was also a profoundly rich experience. In the struggle to find God and each other through this awful experience we connected in some deep ways. We wept, we laughed, we talked honestly and openly with each other. We named some difficult things and we worked through some frustrations and hurts. Some things in life we can change and some things we just have to find ways to accept and live, with a measure of grace, patience, understanding and compassion. I felt both drained and enriched over the few days I was there.

But one of the questions I was confronted with once again as a minister, as a cousin, as a nephew, as a human being... one of the questions that came at me and we wrestled with together was: why? Why did this happen? Why did this happen to such a lively and loving person, a person who was fit, healthy, happy and successful, a mother whose children and family were the centre of her life? Why?

This is the very same question that the disciples ask Jesus in our scripture reading this morning. Only, they ask the why question a little differently. They ask: 'Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' You see, you can blame God, or you can blame the person, or you can blame some circumstance or situation as the cause. Maybe she didn't live right? Maybe she had unhealthy habits that contributed to the cancer somehow physically or emotionally or what have you. Maybe she did something in her life or her family did, and this contributed somehow to her being punished this way.

The world has changed in many ways since Jesus' time, but in many ways the world is just the same. When terrible things happen, one way to help cope with it is to find something or someone to blame. Blaming helps us believe that the world still makes sense. There's always

a reason. There has to be a reason. Blaming also protects us from having to feel the pain and suffering of someone else. If it's their fault then we don't have to feel as bad for them. But as any of us know who have been on the other side of the blame game, it's a terrible place to be. Others blame us and we blame us and the torment can be relentless and all-consuming. We feel isolated and alone. We feel angry and ashamed. Where are you in all this, O God?

Well this is where Jesus comes in. He responds to the disciples question with an answer that's not straightforward. He says: 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.' In other words, suffering and illness are not occasions to blame anyone. Neither this man nor his parents sinned that he was born blind. Rather, his blindness challenges us to seek out creative ways to give glory to God in how we live it and engage it.

So what does that mean? Jesus shows us. He heals the man. But what does this healing consist of? Sadly, the world then, like our world now, thinks of healing in very narrow terms. In the case of this blind man, healing has to be about his eyesight being restored. Anything else is meaningless. But pay attention please: In John's gospel, miracles are called sign. A sign is something that points to something. If I stop my search at the sign itself, I'll miss the whole other thing the sign is pointing to. Think about it. For this man to have been blind his whole life, what kind of stigma of guilt, pity, self-esteem, lack of opportunity, lack of social and family life have been deprived him and imposed on him. If his healing was just about him regaining his sight, what about the healing and transformation of his spirit, his heart and his mind? What about his ability to see in Jesus something that others who have their physical eyesight have totally missed because they're so stuck on the narrowly physical dimensions of healing?

And so it is. The religious authorities take issue with what Jesus does. Jesus is breaking the rules. A society without rules breaks down moral compliance and social obedience. Jesus is disrespecting the holy law given by God through Moses to the people. But the man healed is able to see something in Jesus much more vital in the healing power. He sees love. Love is the rule above all rules. Love heals within. Love heals past the blame, the shame, the pity and contempt of others, the lost opportunities, the years of living with low self-esteem and the guilt of inadequacy. The man is able to rise up and claim his own dignity. He rejects the condemnation and contempt for him and for Jesus the authorities express. He embraces Jesus because he has experienced the love of Jesus. He is able to see again in a way much more richly multi-dimensional in heart and soul, than just having regained his physical sight.

What a powerful story, no? But how does this story speak to us today, especially in situations where there is no visible, physical healing?

Let me tell another story. At the same time as I was engaged with my family in the loss of our beloved Anne, I was also ministering to a remarkable woman called Marion. Marion was dying. She was in palliative care. She was 80 years old. She had been very fit and alive up to that point. But the discovery of advanced cancer changed her situation quite rapidly. Some would say 80 years is far better than many are given. But others would say that without the cancer, Marion could have had many more years to enjoy the rich life she was living.

Marion had lost a husband in her day, but had found love again and remarried, had lost her second husband more recently, and was now dying of cancer herself. And yet, a person who was so alive I have rarely met. She was alive in her gratitude, her peace and her rich appreciation of the goodness of life. With every tragic loss she faced, something invisible in her was resurrecting new life even as she was dying physically. What a source of strength, encouragement and healing she then was to all who came to visit her and all with whom she connected. Marion made an impact on me as a member and volunteer at the church. But she made an even greater impact on me in the way she lived a rich life in her dying...

So, how do the experiences of the blind man and Marion in the face of suffering, illness and struggle connect to us here and now? Well, most of us go through our days having our highs and lows. Sometimes the things that bother us most are things that can be petty, small and inconsequential in the larger scheme of things. Where do we get some perspective? How can God get through to us and bring us to our senses, to some insight, to some centeredness about what's important and what's not? How do we prioritize what is sacred in our lives and our world? How do we create space for what's sacred so that our lives are not crowded in by the toxins of petty conflicts and superficial concerns that bury our spirits and numb our spiritual sensitivity to real concerns and values?

We need people who have that clarity and sight to show us. We need people who are not so burdened that they are spiritually blind. We need people who can see. And people who are suffering and can see are powerful mediators of divine grace to us. They reveal God's desire to work in all of us, and their very bodily condition makes that work that much more powerful a testimony of God's healing, life-changing love.

So, how are we going to find our path? How are we going to open ourselves to God's works even and sometimes through the suffering that comes upon us and those we love? How are we going to stop the blaming game and open our spirits to the giving of God through the

situations, opportunities and persons around us? How are we going to serve, make some commitments in our lives, and advocate for others and for what's important?

Life is an opportunity for God's works to be revealed in us. Situations of difficulty, conflict, suffering, and having to live through the limitations of life are also an opportunity for God's works to be revealed in us. Jesus engages a blind man and he is able to see. Those who are supposed to be the spiritual seers of Israel are spiritually blind to the real truth taught and embodied by Jesus. What about you and me?...

Well, we are living through a difficult time with Covid-19, are we not? We are only in the early days of having to live within highly limited and restricted conditions, with our lives, employment and pursuits totally disrupted... We are vulnerable in different ways, be it physically, with our mental health, with our financial well-being... Who knows what the next few weeks and months will bring... We hope for the best which is a speedy resolution and resumption of life as it was... But most of us are also coming to the realization that things will change forever after we have lived through something like this...

What does it mean to live life as a healing journey? Salvation, which is the biblical word, has its root in *salus* or *salve*, which has to do with healing... Salvation is about wholeness... We live in a broken world and brokenness is in all of us in some way. The gospel invites us into a journey toward greater and greater wholeness with Jesus lighting the way, from blindness to sight. And this, my friends, is not just about tangible, material and social things... it is also about what happens within us at the subterranean level. The story of the blind man is John's gospel attempt to dig a little deeper with one of Jesus' miracle stories, to point to the anatomy of healing in more richly layered terms... The story of Marion is a story that may help us recognize that even though we must endure the hardship of living through covid-19, and hoping and praying we and those we care about will be whole by the end of it, this is exactly the time to journey toward the kind of inner wholeness we are blind to when life is back in its routine and racing along too fast to take the time to dig deeper in order to see more clearly... May you and I be visited by the miraculous in this time of fear and uncertainty; May we come to see more clearly and live more fully even as we struggle with fears that can debilitate us most profoundly. With God, all things are possible; Amen.