

## Disruptive Healing

John 9:1-41

Fourth Sunday in Lent, (March 22) 2020

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Howard Thurman, the great teacher, preacher, and mentor to Dr. Martin Luther King, sought to explain, “what the teachings of Jesus have to say to those who stand at a moment in human history with their backs against the wall” (*Jesus and the Disinherited*, p. 1).

These days we certainly feel like we stand with our backs against the wall. We are shut-in by good sense and by concern but also, by fear, fear of others, fear of being contaminated, and fear of infection and sickness. There is much we do not know. Every day and every week we have a steep learning curve of no schools, no gatherings, limited contact with others, restaurants and businesses closed, people layed-off of work or cut back, and we ask, “What’s next? How long will this last? What are we going to do? How will this change everything?”

Thurman asked different questions for those with their backs against the wall: how will we retain our humanity without forfeiting our souls? Thurman believed that if we stand against the wall long enough, it can easily warp our perspective. We might begin to be suspicious toward others we don’t know. We find ourselves keeping our distance and after a while our social distancing becomes our habit. Our virtual online world becomes easier, more controllable, and more and more the norm.

Our Gospel lesson today is from the Lectionary and is full of questions being asked in the midst of change and things being turned this way and that. John's community, the ones John first wrote for, lived with their backs against the wall. Surrounded by hostile religion and overwhelming circumstances, they asked what Jesus had to say and what Jesus would have them do?

The first line in our story, "As he went on his way, Jesus saw the blind man," tells us that Jesus sees the blind man, but it does not say the disciples see him until Jesus notices him. Otherwise they were oblivious, otherwise, they were going to walk right on past him, like the Priest and the Levite in the Parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke (chapter 10:25-37) who "passed by on the other side." In other words, the disciples and the Priest and the Levite, had practiced "social distancing" until it had become a habit.

It is very easy to be so overwhelmed by needs around us that we become numbed to it. How many people in ditches are we going to see until we are tempted to pass by on the other side, or, just stay home and not go out? We can easily stay inside and hunker down get to where we don't care, where we become blind.

I am not saying that's where we are now. But it is easy to get there.

All the disciples see is an object lesson for them to have a discussion or a debate. They ask Jesus, "Master, who sinned this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (v. 2). They ask the wrong questions. They're looking for blame and explanation. Maybe they want to gripe? "Master who is responsible for this? Is China responsible? What about Trump? Is he at fault? Or our health care system or lack of pandemic planning or what? Who can we blame?"

Jesus is not interested in their questions. He says, “I don’t know. What I do know is that this is an opportunity for God to be glorified, an opportunity to see God at work. This is where we see what the church is made of” and then he goes into action. He spits on the ground, makes a muddy paste, and spreads it on the blind man’s eyes. Then he says, “Go and wash in the pool of Siloam.” When the man returns, he can see for the first time in his entire life.

During the second century of the western Roman Empire, the Plague of Galen (165-180) killed perhaps a third of the population. It was during this plague that the Christian faith showed what it could do and what it was made of, as hundreds of thousands of people grew sick with many left on the streets to die, Christians went out and tended to the sick and dying while most everyone else locked their doors and withdrew or ran for the hills. Because they did not fear death, these Christ-followers stayed in plague-ravaged cities and showed mercy to all people no matter their religion or race or economic status. Here was a religious faith and community of disciples who acted. They didn’t worry over who was to blame and certainly did not blame victims or scapegoat. They went out and served, loved, and practiced mercy (see Diana Butler Bass, *A People’s History of Christianity: The Other Side of the Story*, p. 59-60).

There is so much we do not yet know about COVID-19, and we do not know what else will happen. In the short term, our first calling is to stay home and make phone calls and other ways to contact each other. Let’s pray for each other and stay in touch the best ways we can. Further out, there will likely be other ways we can act. Right now, Barbara Cordell and Pauline Patterson are organizing our seamstresses to sew and make surgical masks and head-coverings for our local

medical professionals. HOPE Food Pantry is organizing drive-through food pickup for hungry people. In the days to come, we will undoubtedly find other ways to serve and part of our job in the church office will be helping you hear of such opportunities. Our calling is to act. And as we learn and grow through this contagion we will learn how to act as Jesus acts.

Back to our story. Now it gets interesting. Jesus' healing of the man disrupts everything. The ex-blind man tries to go home but can't. When he shows up among family and friends as a changed man, there is no celebration, only questions and doubts. "Who are you?" "Who is this Jesus you keep talking about?"

When our vision changes; we change – how we see, what we see says who we become. Vision, perspective, how we see shapes, even determines what we do. As Stanley Hauerwas says, "We are only able to work in the world we see." When our sight changes, our work changes. When our vision changes; our lives change. And then we realize, we're not so sure we want to get well. We're not so sure we want to see differently than we do now. Change is scary. "I might not be able to see well, but I've learned to cope, thank you very much, Jesus."

And in the next scene there is even more disruption because the formerly blind man is brought before the religious leaders. We are told that all this healing occurred on the Sabbath and we know using spittle and clay on a person was considered religiously and ritually unclean, therefore, this man is not supposed to be in the synagogue. The preachers immediately practice social distancing, plus they start worrying over synagogue worship. "He can't be here! He's unclean! Do we need to go to online worship services to stay away from him?" One preacher turns to the other, "Do you know how to do online stuff, I sure don't. What are we

going to do?” Furthermore, though the ex-blind man is standing right there in front of them, they can’t admit that he can see. They refuse to see who he is. They refuse to believe that change is truly possible. He does not fit into their categories; therefore, he must be wrong, not their categories.

The preachers go back and forth trying to figure all this out, and they bring in the family and then go back to the former blind man and demand that he confess to them that Jesus is a sinner. I love his response: “Whether or not he is a sinner, I don’t know. All I know is this: once I was blind, but now I see. I’ve told you how this happened but you took no notice.” In other words, are you blind?! Then he adds, “Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples?!” In response, the preachers throw the man out.

Once more alone, with his back against the wall, Jesus comes to him again. Even though Jesus has been out of the story, God has been at work throughout the whole story. Whether we see him or not, God is at work. Jesus said at the beginning, that here was a chance to see what God is doing, and so we do. God heals this man, and as a result, everything is disrupted. But in the end, the man is a new person, who sees clearly, stands tall, and who is a Christ-follower.

Through this entire story this formerly blind man grows and changes and adapts. He improvises. His family and friends and the preachers are unable to improvise and cannot handle change. But he does.

Let’s be a people who pray and prepare and plan even in the midst of these incredible changes we’re experiencing. Let’s root our lives so deeply in God, that we are able to improvise through all this disruption. At the same time, remember,

that through all this God is at work in ways we perhaps we do not see – through health care professionals putting their lives on the line tending to sick people, people working in pharmacies and grocery stores and food transportation, people keeping our utilities running and keeping our city and hospitals running... on and on. God is at work through every phone call, every email, every note, every small effort to tend mercy and show love. God is at work through you and God is at work changing you.

God did not cause this pandemic, but never doubt that God is at work in it bringing about a new day.

Back in the late 1970's, Austin Heights hosted Mary Cosby for a church-wide retreat. Mary and her husband Gordon were from Church of the Savior in Washington D.C., a remarkable, even legendary small congregation. Gordon believed in planning. He said we needed solid thinking about what might emerge in the shared life of a small church, and about the direction the church hoped to travel. He was clear, "We're not supposed to be sloppy in our thinking." But he went on to say, "I would hold very loosely to the plan and depend much more on the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the moment" (from "Sojourners" Aug - Sept. 1991, 27).

And so we do. We make our plans but hold them loosely. We open our eyes to see what the Holy Spirit is up to, to see God at work.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.