"The Problem of Goodness"

The Fourth Sunday in Lent

First Congregational United Church of Christ
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Text: John 9:1-41

Today's reading from the gospel of John is about a man who was blind from birth, and who was given his sight by Jesus. With the exception of the raising of Lazarus from death, which happens to be next week's gospel reading, this story is the longest account of a miracle performed by Jesus in all of the gospels. That's not surprising, given its theme. In John's gospel we're reminded again and again of the contrast between the light of Christ and the darkness of the world into which he came. So this story captures that main theme; it's a story about darkness and light, the darkness of a man's blindness, and the light that Jesus brought into his life.

It's also a story about a startling reversal, the kind of reversal that Jesus tells us is part and parcel of what it means to be living in the realm of God. In this reversal, a blind man ends up seeing, not just seeing the world around him, but seeing a profound spiritual truth, that Jesus is the Messiah. And the people who are supposed to understand religious truth, the religious leaders, the supposedly enlightened scholars, are in reality blind to the truth that Jesus embodies. The people who are supposed to see can't, but the man who had been blind from birth is the one who ends up seeing things most clearly.

So, we have darkness and light, and we have the divine reversal that turns our understanding about the way the world is supposed to work upside down. The first shall be last and the last first; those who have much really have nothing; those who mourn will rejoice and those who pursue an illusory happiness end up being profoundly sad. And, yes, the blind see, and those who think that they see most clearly are the ones who are really living in the deepest darkness.

But this is also an account of our human tendency to try to manage God's goodness. It tells us that God's grace defies all of our efforts to bring it under our own control. The tone is set at the very beginning of this

account. Jesus and the disciples see a man who had been blind from birth. Many of the gospel accounts of Jesus' miracles begin with someone coming to him for healing of some sort: the woman with the flow of blood who touched Jesus' robe in the crowd; the blind man by the roadside who called out that he wanted to see again; the centurion who appealed to Jesus to cure his slave; the ten lepers; the paralyzed man whose friends lowered him from the roof into a room where Jesus was so that he could be healed. But this one begins with Jesus and his disciples seeing a blind man, a man who had been blind from birth. The blind man didn't call out to them, didn't ask for help. Perhaps his silence meant that he had meekly accepted his lot in life.

The disciples didn't seem even to consider the possibility that Jesus might heal the man. Rather, they treated his blindness as an interesting case study for a theological issue they wanted to talk about with Jesus. They wanted to know who was at fault for this sad state of affairs. It was widely believed in Jesus' time that illness and infirmities were consequences of sin. Even though he had been blind from birth, the disciples wanted to know whether the man had brought this blindness on himself, or was it something his parents had done. They wanted to know whose sin it was that caused this man's blindness. For them it wasn't an occasion for compassion; it was an opportunity to blame. It's a classic technique for evading responsibility for someone else's plight: "Well, they got themselves into this fix, didn't they?" And, significantly, it's a restatement of that famous problem of evil that we encounter time and time again. "If God is good, and if God is all-powerful, why is there evil in this world?" The disciples thought they had the answer, they thought that the problem wasn't with God. It was a problem caused by this man, or by his parents. It's echoed when someone who contracts an awful disease asks, "What did I do to deserve this?"

What the disciples were conjuring with is a question that is most poignantly raised, but never really answered, by the book of Job. You remember that story, I hope. Job was a righteous man, and he was incredibly prosperous. He had property, family, health—all the good things of life. So far, Job's situation conforms to popular expectations, and, let's be honest, to what we ourselves expect. If I am righteous, I'll be rewarded for my righteousness. Virtue is not its own reward; virtue should be rewarded. If things were otherwise, after all, what would be the point in being righteous? Why be good if you don't get something for it?

You remember what happened next. Satan got God's permission to tempt Job, to take away everything that Job had, to destroy his family, to afflict him with the most horrible diseases. "See if he remains faithful after all this!" was Satan's taunt.

Well, think of the blind man in today's reading from John as the reverse of Job. He begins with nothing. He's a blind beggar by the roadside, a hopeless case. Just as Job's wife and his friends asked what Job had done to deserve his sudden descent into disaster, so the disciples asked Jesus what this blind man, blind from birth, could have done to deserve his fate. Since he was blind from birth, had the sin been a sin of his parents? "No," Jesus responded. "God doesn't operate like that. God gives each of us the capacity to be a sign of God's love."

But here's the reversal. The blind man, who didn't even ask to be cured of his blindness, received his sight from Jesus. And suddenly the problem is no longer the problem of evil. It's a problem of goodness. Job's friends, who turned out to be not such good friends, tried to figure out what Job had done to deserve the catastrophes visited on him. They tried to figure out the problem of evil by placing all the blame on poor Job. The no longer blind man's neighbors, and then the supposedly knowledgeable religious authorities who pronounced on his case had an entirely different conundrum. They had to contend with the problem of goodness, which turned out to be every bit as difficult to explain as the problem of evil. What could this blind man have done to deserve the gift of sight? He had just sat there, doing what he did every day of his miserable life, begging. He hadn't even asked for a cure.

So, like Job's friends, the smart people, the people with insight, the scholars of religion, tried to manage the problem. They needed an explanation that made sense in their moral universe. So, they argued, first, that maybe this guy who claimed to be the blind guy wasn't really the blind guy. Maybe it was all an elaborate hoax. The response came back from the formerly blind man, "Yes, I'm the blind guy." "But how is that you can see now?" "I haven't the faintest. All I know is that this fellow called Jesus put some mud on my eyes, and then I could see. That's really all I know."

Unmerited goodness? Being healed without doing something to earn it? Couldn't be! So our experts called in the parents. Perhaps, they reasoned, the man hadn't really been blind in the first place. "Come on now, tell the truth, your son wasn't really blind, was he?" "Look, trust us. He was born blind. But if you don't believe us, ask him, he's old enough to answer for himself."

So the religious people, still having trouble with this idea that God's goodness isn't something you can earn, tried to attack the one who is the source of the problem of goodness, the one whose grace defies expectation and explanation, Jesus. "Look, this Jesus is a sinner," they said. "He hangs around with all the wrong people, and he would have violated the Sabbath if he really had healed you. So how could he have healed you?"

What follows is the most eloquent and beautiful statement of the entire passage. It's all the more beautiful because it doesn't come wrapped in theological jargon, but states a truth with stunning simplicity. "One thing I do know, is that though I was blind, now I see." Listen again. "Though I was blind, now I see." If this quotation sounds familiar, it's because it was picked up by John Newton in his beloved hymn, "Amazing Grace." "I once was lost, but now am found; was blind, but now I see." John Newton had been the captain of a slave ship, when miraculously his blindness to the human misery he was causing was lifted. He became a new man because he was able to see the world differently, and his insight was an unmerited gift from Jesus. Amazing grace. All the elaborate justifications that people of the time used to defend slavery, some of them from the Bible and cited by religious people, all of that self-justifying fog was suddenly swept away. Newton saw, really saw, the human wreckage he was causing, and then he went on to become a tireless foe of slavery.

The Pharisees still couldn't fathom the problem of goodness. They couldn't believe that Jesus could cure the blindness of a man who was born blind. But Jesus told them that he had come into the world for precisely this purpose: to give vision to those who had none, and to point to the blindness of those who were convinced that they and they alone could see the world properly.

Lent is a time when we acknowledge our blindness—we are all blind from birth— and that acknowledgment is the first step toward insight. Lent is a time when we see goodness not as a problem, but as a gift, a gift that we receive with simple gratitude.

"I once was lost, but now am found; was blind, but now I see." Or, to go back to good old Job, Job at the depth of his suffering, Job who said those words that we repeat, that we sing, at Easter. "I know that my Redeemer lives." Amen.