

Who Sinned?
Sermon 177 | Greystone Baptist Church | March 19, 2023
John 9:1-12

I heard a story once about a conference for presbyterian ministers. After the main session had ended, everybody decided to go out to the bar just down the street from the conference center. The bartenders were excited as the once-empty room filled with paying customers. But they soon realized this was not their ordinary crowd of locals but instead a group of pastors, which they found to be exceptionally funny.

At one point one of the bartenders said, "Well, I guess if I have any big or important questions I should ask them now. You guys probably have all the answers!" Overhearing the question and in a rare moment of seriousness, one of the pastors hollered out, "Answers? I don't know about answers. I just try to ask good questions." Answers are important, but I think this pastor was right: an answer struggles to reach beyond the frame of the question.

Leadership expert, Dr. Mar-i-lee Adams has a popular book called *Change Your Questions, Change Your Life*, and in it, she says that "We live in the worlds our questions create." Academics in all kinds of disciplines know that this is true. Sociologists know that if you want to discover helpful information from a survey, you have to carefully craft each question. Experiments in the natural sciences use the scientific method which begins with asking a good question. Therapists and mental health clinicians specialize in asking the right questions. Lawyers are schooled for years on how to ask their questions (lest their line of questioning be thrown out or overruled for veering off course).

Theologians and biblical scholars are taught early on to ask a critical set of questions; and here in John's Gospel, we find the disciples asking a very important question: Who sinned? Now, to us, this may seem like a silly question - if not plainly the wrong question. But it was, nevertheless, a valid question in the ancient world. Much like everyone else in their society, "The disciples assumed that anyone born with or stricken by a physical ailment was suffering from sins committed by previous generations."

They believed, because they had been taught to believe, that physical ailments and genetic differences, along with other things like bad fortune and poverty were all symbols of God's favor (or lack thereof). There was an idea - a functioning theology really - that if somebody was living right, they would be spared from pain, suffering, illness, and hardship. If they were immoral though, God would surely punish them. "Their question, [...] exposes their [assumptions... and their] misunderstanding of what sin represents now that Jesus is in the world. ... "

John scholar, Karoline Lewis writes, "Sin in the Gospel of John is not a moral category but a category of relationship. To be IN sin or TO sin is to not be in relationship with God..." or with the world that God so dearly loved.

So the disciples, in asking their honest question, discovered an error in their own ways. They got a “good look in the mirror” so the saying goes when Jesus answers their question with, “Neither this man nor his parents” sinned. In this answer, the disciples came to realize that their relationship with this man - and many others like him - was broken because of the assumptions of guilt placed on marginalized people. Rather than trying to help, the disciples’ first response was to assign fault.

This is one of those moments where the disciples help me remember an elementary school lesson. You know the one where you look at your hand when you’re pointing your finger at someone else and some smart aleck points out that when you do it, you’ve actually got three fingers pointing straight back at yourself. Who sinned? They want to know, Was it him or his parents?

It is always easier to blame someone else for the suffering we experience in life. The car accident happens: The sun was in my eyes! Why was he there in the first place?! We did the task incorrectly: I didn’t get the memo. Our favorite sports team lost the game: The refs were totally biased!

If we can blame someone else we can excuse ourselves from both ignorance and culpability... Blame allows us to continue to believe that whatever happened wasn’t our fault. But blame also functions in another way. Like when things happen that truly are beyond explanation: The diagnosis is delivered forcing us to change all of our plans. The hurricane hits destroying homes, businesses, and lives. The pandemic rages, causing isolation, disruption, and death. The economy expands too fast, and then it contracts leaving us all scared and scrounging to save every penny we have.

Who is responsible for these things? Who’s to blame? We want to know! Because we need to know how to project our fears upon someone else and protect ourselves from the vulnerable truth that this suffering may not be the last.

In every age, there are scapegoats - easy targets for all of our uncertainty. In recent history, these have been the feminists, the liberals, the conservatives, the academics, the working poor, the Hollywood elite, the gays, the Christians, the Muslims, the Jews, the racial minorities, the undocumented immigrants, the city dwellers, the country folk... the list goes on and on and on. And as we add our voices to these refrains we perpetuate toxic ideologies and toxic theologies that alienate our relationship with God and one another. More simply put: we sin. All the while pointing our finger at someone else as if they could possibly be responsible for our particular suffering. But this is not the way Jesus has taught us to live. Notice that when Jesus sees the man born blind, he is not concerned with who was at fault be it God, or the parents, or the man himself.

Instead of Who sinned? Jesus wants to know is healing possible?
Instead of Who is to blame? Jesus wants to know: how can we all be made whole?
Instead of “bless his heart, I feel so bad for him, wish there was something I could do...”
Jesus bent down and scraped up the mud beneath his feet, then he stole some spit from his own mouth and smeared it on the man’s face.

Jesus is operating from a totally different framework and because of it, everyone on the road that day was healed.

Yes, we all remember the blind man whose eyes were opened after the spit-mud-paste was washed off. But let us not overlook the others who were healed from their assumptions about who was righteous and who had sinned. Yes, even those faithful disciples, the ones who followed Jesus every single day needed to learn that sometimes things are not as they seem. Sometimes our questions betray our biases. Sometimes it might help to take a faithful look in the mirror - And allow God to show us some things we need to unlearn in order to be healed.

We didn't read the whole story today. It goes on for 29 more verses. You know John can be a little verbose at times. I would encourage you all to read the whole story in your Bibles sometime this week and see what speaks to you.

Lutheran Pastor, Nadia Bolz Weber paraphrases the story and her version is short enough that we can get a sense of the whole story. Hear now the Gospel through her words:

The Kingdom of Heaven is like this - God came to earth and walked among us for a while. While he was here, he encountered a man who was blind from birth and reduced to begging for his day-to-day needs. Though this man said nothing, Jesus saw him, went to him, and restored his sight. No one could believe the miracle that happened in their midst. Some thought it was fake news, some suspected sorcery or a trick. Many pundits commented on it, they even brought in the man's parents to make sure it was really the right guy. But there was no getting around it - God's love had shined a light into his own, literal darkness. But this love did not force its way in among the people. And so, while many heard this good news, and received new, spiritual sight of their own, others were free to cling to their own way, even if it left them in darkness.

Friends, in this season we have all been asking our honest questions. Maybe you've written them down in a journal, maybe they're written in your heart and mind. Today we're taking them to the mirror to see what our questions may reveal about ourselves, our biases, and our assumptions. Today we journey alongside the disciples who were quick to ask: Who sinned? And slow to learn that it was they themselves who would be healed. This is vulnerable work. But this is essential work if we truly want to continue to grow in relationship with God. ... and so that makes it HOLY work.

So in the moments ahead, in the silence and in the sounds of music that follow, consider your questions and invite God to open your eyes a bit so that you might begin to see what lies behind them.