
Why, How, Who

John 9:1-41

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on March 22, 2020 by the Rev. Bruce Puckett

It's the sixth time in John's Gospel that Jesus' work is called a sign or a miracle. Throughout the Gospel thus far, Jesus' signs have been providing an ever-clearer picture of who the wonder-working Jesus really is. By the time Jesus encounters this man blind from birth, his disciples were likely expecting Jesus to work his wonders yet again. When they came upon this man, the disciples did not seem interested in another miracle, they wanted the answer to a pressing question on their mind, one with deep theological implications. "Teacher," they said, "who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind?"

In asking their question, the disciples assume that someone's wrongdoing or failing or brokenness is the root cause of the situation. They had no doubt learned this from the religious teachings of the day, and these teachings were justified, at least in part, by some of the writings of holy scriptures. So they ask their teacher to make it clear for them—to be the judge. When we listen carefully to the disciples' question, we can hear them pressing for a response to another question: "Why?" Why is it that someone is born without sight? Why would it be that this misfortune, this undesirable situation would happen to anyone? The truth is, their question shows they have already assumed they know a partial answer to the why—it's got to be someone's fault. Really, it's a conventional response to a profound wondering: "Why?" The reason must be connected to someone's wrong actions. There must be some traceable cause for this, some reason why, that had actions or responses been different the situation could have been otherwise.

Don't we find ourselves also asking the question of "why?" when we encounter undesirable situations? And how often is the why question buried in another accusatory or blaming question? Like the disciples, we want to be able to point to a way someone must be responsible for the circumstances of the present. We so often do this in the questions we ask related to people's illnesses—"Was she a smoker?"—or to their injury—"Was he hiking where he shouldn't have been?"—or to their victimization—"Was she walking alone at night in that part of town?"—or to their impoverished situation—"Did he have budget and practice good financial peace principles?" We ask these questions assuming that the person must have brought the situation on themselves in some way. I think we prefer to make this assumption because it makes us believe that we can be in control. If we simply act differently than these people, then we can avoid the trouble or misfortune or calamity or hardship they've experienced. Because the question of "why?" often doesn't have an easy answer, we prefer more simplified questions about people's wrong ways of acting or being or doing, forgetting what every intro research class teaches that correlation doesn't necessarily equate causation.

Jesus seems to understand this tendency in his disciples. He hears the why question that is buried beneath the disciples' question of "who sinned?" So he offers an answer, choosing neither of the options they gave him. Instead, Jesus corrects his disciples' wrong thinking and believing. He corrects the disciples' misguided attempts to blame hardship and calamity and struggle on the man or his family. Jesus says to the disciples, "It wasn't their sin that caused this situation. Yet, that the works of God might be revealed in this man." Jesus helps the disciples see the situation differently. By Jesus—the light of the world—healing this man, God's work is done and God's ways of creating anew are revealed. The hardship into which this man was born becomes an opportunity

for Jesus to demonstrate God's good work. It's not so much that this was the purpose of the man being born blind—as if the man spent his whole life without sight just for this moment—but that the fact of this man's disability provided an opportunity for God's work to be displayed anew in that moment.

Sometimes we get this confused because translations like the New Revised Standard Version (the version we use for worship at the Chapel) add something not in the text. The NRSV says, "He was born blind that God's works might be revealed in him," but the text does not include "he was born blind." It simply says, "but that God's works might be revealed in him." So Jesus' response offers an alternative to the question of "why"—the question of meaning or purpose or cause—behind this man's lack of sight, and instead points to the opportunity that this situation is for Jesus to demonstrate what true sight really is all about.

I just wonder if the questions of why related to our troubled situations in the present might be met by Jesus encouraging us to open our eyes to the opportunity that our situations provide for God to be revealed more clearly among us. (It's not that this response gives us the purpose or reason behind our current realities, but it helps us see something beyond those realities.)

If the disciples had the "why" question at heart, the other characters in the story seem to be consumed with the "how" question. Over and over throughout the story people ask the man how he was healed. They want to know the mechanics of his healing, the process by which he went from being without sight to being able to see. Maybe the people were simply fascinated by the miracle. Maybe they were curious how their own ailments or challenging predicaments might be healed or overcome. Maybe they were looking for answers or solutions to address their own needs. Whatever the reason was, people constantly asked, "How?"

Don't we find ourselves asking the how question of healing, too? Sometimes in times of trial or great calamity the how questions seem far more pressing than the why questions. The existential pondering of "why" loses its place in the immediacy and desperation of needed practices and plans—how? How can we be healed? How can we stop the pandemic? How can we fix the economy? How can we get people to stop hoarding, to consider their neighbors in need, to stay away from others for the sake of public health?

These how questions are urgent and necessary and important for us, and they were no doubt the same for some of those asking how to this now sighted man. At first the man simply told the story. "Jesus bent down, spit saliva in the dirt, mixed it to make mud, put the salve on my eyes before sending me to wash in the 'sent' pool." Even as the man recounts the story, we can hear echoes of God's work in creation: God coming down, gathering the dirt, breathing into it, and creating humankind. It's as if the telling of the story of how Jesus accomplished this sign is actually already pointing to something more significant than the "how."

As the "how" questions persisted to the man and to his parents, he gradually started to see that the most important question wasn't the why question or the how question, but was the "who" question? "Who was the one who healed me? Who was the one who bent down, got his hands dirty, and touched me allowing God's works to be revealed? Who was the one who through the salve of his saliva created something new in me?"

The man's healing was not simply about Jesus giving him his physical sight. The man's healing—his salvation—came through the eyes of his heart, mind, and spirit being opened to see Jesus for who he really is. In gaining this spiritual sight, the man could truly see that his deepest questions, needs, yearnings, and hopes are all found in the one who gave him sight—Jesus. As his

spiritual sight grew keener, his testimony, his witness, his sharing of what he could now truly see became more assured until in the end of the story he is counted among Jesus' disciples—one who can see because he is led by the light of the world.

Siblings in Christ, we are in a time where we are asking so many questions about the recent past, our present, and the future. We are asking “why” questions and “how” questions and “whose fault is it anyway” questions. But through the story of the healing of the blind man, God is reminding us today that the most important question is and the most critical answer comes when we ask the question, “who?” Because the answer to “who?” is Jesus. He is the one who gets down and dirty and touches those who others simply see as broken, sinful, sick, hopeless, poor, dispensable. He is the one who has guided his people through plague and pandemic in the past. And he is the one who is the balm, the salve, the salvation, and hope for us even today.

So sisters and brothers in Christ, like the man who was given sight don't stop telling the story of the one who is at work even now. The time is now for God's people to demonstrate a deeper sense of sight. This is a time when the world, literally the whole world, needs to be reminded of the one who offers hope and healing and life, the one who doesn't ignore the present hardship or calamity or challenge but who recognizes in it an opportunity to see God working anew. This is a time when God's people must keep our eyes open to see and name the work of God, even in the midst of devastation and loss. So people of God, may you see clearly God's work in the world even now in these troubled times. And may you bear witness to Christ's presence to all the world for the glory of God. Amen.