

A woman was just about to step into the shower one morning when the doorbell rang. Not sure she wanted to answer the door or not, she yelled, “Who Is It?” A deep voice replied, ‘It’s the Blind Man.’ She figured she was safe, after all a blind man wouldn’t care if she answered the door in her birthday suit, so she opened the door. He looked at her in shock and asked, “Where would you like me to hang these window blinds, lady?” _

Our Scripture lesson today is also about a blind man, one who had been blind since birth. Upon seeing him, the disciples immediately ask Jesus, “Rabbi, who sinned this man or his parents that he was born blind?” The disciples assumed what people have assumed throughout history. If someone is afflicted in some way they must deserve it. Human suffering is directly related to human sin.

In the Hebrew Bible there are three different words for sin, or the act of separation from God. The first and most frequently used comes from the word *chatah* meaning “to miss a mark.” It describes the act of going astray. The second Hebrew word comes from the root *avah* and that means “to act wrongly.” This is translated as iniquity, and unusually involves the violation of commandments. The third word comes from the root word *pasha* meaning “to rebel.” This is full fledged revolt against God. All three of these Hebrew words describe a condition of violating the will of God. Whether people are missing the mark, acting wrongly, or engaging in outright rebellion, they are out of step with God’s intentions for their lives. In response, God does not punish or hurt them, but rather tries to correct them and bring them back into right relationship. (*Speaking of Sin*, Barbara Brown Taylor)

Nevertheless, it was a common belief in the ancient world, and a belief which persists in our day--if you had affliction and sorrow in your life, it must be because you have done something wrong. If things are difficult for you, then at some point you must have done something to deserve it. There was believed to be an instantaneous and direct relationship between sin and suffering.

- You’re poor—it must be your own fault.
- Your kids are in trouble—you must be a bad parent.
- You lost your job—should have seen it coming and tried harder.
- You have cancer—you really should have taken better care of yourself.

Whatever life sends your way you are to some degree responsible for it. Now certainly human beings have to take responsibility for their own lives and understand that our choices bring certain consequences. But to suggest that suffering is given as punishment for sin is woefully misguided.

Thornton Wilder's novel *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* takes this line of reasoning to its logical extreme. This story is the account of one priest's effort to prove, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that the reason a bridge collapsed with certain people on it, was because of the moral flaws of those people. The priest tried to logically demonstrate that those who perished deserved such a fate; this was their punishment for sin. He proves that every person who died on that bridge had some sort of evil in their past. (Of course every person on every bridge has something evil in their past).

This line of thinking is more common than you might assume, for there are those who believe Hurricane Katrina was sent by God to punish New Orleans for its well known decadence, just as all natural disasters are intentionally caused by God to teach sinful humanity a lesson.

Not too long ago I was visiting with a woman who suffered a third miscarriage. She wanted children more than anything else in this world, but seemed unable to carry a child to term. She was convinced that this was her punishment for having an abortion as a teenager. This past week I met with a man who had been laid off after 35 years of faithful service to his company. He was absolutely lost and asking why God was doing this to him. Now it is true that there are consequences for our actions, but our suffering is not inflicted by a punitive God to teach us a lesson.

Jesus' response to the disciples question in this Scripture lesson is illuminating. When they asked: "Who Sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?" Jesus says: His blindness has nothing to do with any of the sins he committed and nothing to do with any sins his parents have committed. You are looking for someone to blame. There is no cause and effect here. He was born blind for one reason and one reason only – so that the power of God might be seen at work in him!" What an incredible thing to say! "...so that the power of God might be seen at work in him." Those words lift my spirits every time I hear them.

Jesus firmly rejects any suggestion that affliction and suffering come only to those who somehow deserve it. Nobody sinned, and yet this man was born blind anyway. But his blindness could be used for a higher purpose, to direct people to God. His blindness could transform him into a rare kind of blessing in the world, a person who can give glory to God even when afflicted with undeserved suffering.

Jesus is trying to teach his disciples that the lesson of suffering is not trying to understand why it happens, or who deserves it, but in knowing what to do with it when it does happen. "He was born blind so that the power of God might be seen at work in him."

I have tried to remember this difficult lesson during the dark days of my own life. When I have experienced things that seemed so undeserved and so painful, I try to move beyond feeling sorry for myself to a remembrance that my suffering

can be used for positive ends. And it's true; God has used me in ways I never would have been used had I not suffered myself. Now I would never, ever ask for it, "Please God, send me some affliction so that your power might be seen in me!" Instead I could pray, "Please God, give me an easy life and let somebody else reveal your power!" Nevertheless, I do know that my experience of suffering has given me far more compassion and wisdom to offer others who suffer. Interestingly enough, when I help others, I find healing for myself.

Did anyone watch the Super Bowl last Sunday? You know, I am not a big football fan at all. But I watched it for the commercials, and discovered that it was a fantastic football game. I was disappointed in the outcome, however, because I wanted the underdog Cardinals to win because their quarterback Kurt Warner is an amazing man. When he first met his wife Brenda, she was a single mother with two kids, one disabled. Her son had suffered brain damage as a result of being dropped as an infant. Their marriage and his subsequent adoption of this disabled boy led to a passion for helping special needs children, and the First Things First foundation was born. The website is listed in your bulletins today, and they do incredible things. Had Kurt Warner not experienced the challenges faced by his adopted son, none of this would have happened. But now, "...the power of God might be seen at work in him."

Of course this, I think is what has drawn people to Jesus throughout history. He understood suffering, and its redemptive power. He was drawn to the suffering, and we are drawn to him because of his understanding of suffering. His life on earth was hard and unbearably sad, and yet it was all used to glorify God. Jesus proved that there is profound meaning, even in our most negative experiences. There's a purpose, even in our reversals and setbacks and afflictions. His closest friends would deny, betray and abandon him, everyone would turn on him, and eventually this good and loving man would be murdered like a common criminal. Was God trying to punish him and teach him a lesson? Of course not. Ultimately all his suffering was used for positive purposes, and twenty centuries later, and we still remember his life, death, and victory over death. Through him we know that hope is more persistent than despair, and life stronger than death.

Jesus proved that what matters is not what happens to us. What matters is what we do with what happens to us and whether we allow it to teach us, deepen us and glorify God.

Now in the story we heard from John, the blind man is actually healed of his blindness. That doesn't always happen to us, does it? We do not always get healed of our afflictions or sorrows, even though we might pray and pray for that to happen. Yet with God's grace we can discover the courage to accept that which we cannot understand. We can find the vision which allows us to see through the eyes of love.

I will never forget the time I saw Stevie Wonder sing “Amazing Grace.” He was performing at the funeral for renowned rock guitarist Stevie Ray Vaughn, who was killed in a plane crash in 1990. Vaughn’s family requested that Stevie Wonder sing at that service. It was poignant to watch blind Stevie Wonder singing:

“I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.” Those words had a profound truth, even for someone who had been blind since birth. Stevie Wonder could see, with spiritual, visionary ability.

Ken Medema is an incredible musician who, like Stevie Wonder was also born blind. As a young boy he had musical aptitude, so he learned with Braille music, and then learned to play by ear and improvise. He wrote the song we will sing shortly, entitled, “Lord, Listen To Your Children Praying.” He is a theologian, composer and gifted musician. He is able to compose songs on the spot, so when he is in a worship service he will compose a song based upon words, stories, sermons, whatever he is hearing which allows him to write and perform a song within minutes. He has published 26 albums and has his own recording company.

Ken Medema considers his blindness a tool with which to glorify God. Once you’ve been around someone like that you’ll look at your own limitations in an entirely different way. If you were to ask Ken Medema why he was born blind, he would say: “I was born blind so that I can praise God in a special way. I was born blind so that I can glorify God like most people will never be able to do!”

Now I know it is not easy to view your suffering and affliction as wonderful opportunities to give glory to God. It is not easy for any of us because this life can be so sad and unfair. It helps to remember that our sorrows, struggles and afflictions are not sent by a punitive God to punish us or teach us a lesson. Yet, within all that happens there is something to be gained and something to learn.

Our challenges and failures are opportunities for growth, humility and compassion. They are opportunities to deepen our understanding of God, other people and ourselves. For when we trust in God and reach out to bless others, we are given back our sight and we are healed.

Amen.