**“Do we really want to know?”**

John 9:1-41

March 19, 2017, David M. Griebner, Riverside UMC

Today we have another story about Jesus from the Gospel of John. This story is about how Jesus healed a man who had been blind from birth. However, the story is actually less about the miraculous healing, and more about how different people reacted to it because He did it on the Sabbath.

Now we will explore all this in some detail in a moment. But before we do I want to ask you to consider a couple questions. I’d like for you to keep these questions in mind as we work through this chapter. Here they are. *What kind of relationship do you have with Jesus? Is there anything you know of that that is holding you back from a deeper and more fruitful relationship with Him? If there was something like this, something holding you back, something keeping you from falling more deeply into His arms, would you want to know what it is?* Do these questions strike you as interesting? Dangerous? Or possibly healing, or inspiring? Let’s look at the story.

It begins when Jesus and the disciples come across a man who has been blind from birth. Seeing him the disciples ask Jesus a question. “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” This may sound like an odd, insensitive, or even offensive question to us, but it wasn’t an unusual question for that time. It’s always hard to say how widespread or common an understanding like this was, but at this time there was a general assumption that when something bad happened it was because someone sinned. This is one way the people in Jesus’ time tried to make sense of some of the suffering they saw. So, who sinned, this man or his parents? Jesus rejects either choice. Instead He directs the encounter in an entirely different direction. Here’s how the Message Bible paraphrases Jesus’ response. “You’re asking the wrong question. You’re looking for someone to blame. There is no such cause-effect here. Look instead for what God can do.”

Basically Jesus affirms what we all know to be true from our own experience. There is no adequate or complete explanation for all the suffering we see. There might be an answer somewhere, but right now it is hidden from our eyes and beyond our limited understanding. However, there is something we can do. We can stop trying to figure it out and instead focus on what God is doing or asking us to do in response. What is God doing and what is God asking you and I to do? And so Jesus makes a couple mud pies with some of spit and dirt and tells the man to go wash in the Pool of Siloam. He does and he is healed. And now the real fun begins.

Let’s call the first response **“No Way.”** The people closest to him, his neighbors and even those who used to see him begging have a hard time believing it’s the same guy. Some say he only looks like the guy who used to beg. But the man insists ‘It’s really me!” **No way!** And so they ask the next question? What happened? He says Jesus did it. You would think this would be cause for celebration, but isn’t. The healing took place on the Sabbath. We know from other stories in the Bible that the Pharisees and others taught that you were not supposed to do this kind of thing on the Sabbath. But the evidence is right in front of them. And they don’t know what to make of it.

So they take the guy to the Pharisees. They will have the answer! But the Pharisees have the same problem. The miracle took place on the Sabbath. However they are both more determined and cleverer than the crowd. The man can obviously see, but it is the Sabbath – so what are they to do? Let’s call this part of the story **“Looking for a loophole.”** Who remembers the comic W.C. Fields? He wasn’t exactly known as a religious man, but one day the story goes someone caught him reading the Bible. His response? ‘Just looking for loopholes, looking for loopholes.’ So what’s the out? Maybe he wasn’t really blind in the first place. So they track down his parents. Is this your son? Yes. Was he born blind? Yes. Well there goes that idea.

But instead of giving up they press the question with the parents. Let’s call this section **“Shoot the messenger”** *or* **“Intimidation 101.”** The parents stick to the story. He is their son. He was born blind. And the Pharisees stick to their question. *Well, then how is it now that he can see*? The obvious answer is that Jesus healed him. It’s the only answer left. But if that’s what happened then that suggests that Jesus may truly be the Messiah, but the Pharisees have already declared that anyone who believes that Jesus is the Messiah will be thrown out of the Synagogue. And that would have been disastrous for most people, especially for this man and his wife. Why? One commentator I read pointed it out. The fact that the man born blind was a beggar and that his parents were still alive, suggests that they were so poor they could hardly take care of themselves, much less him. They desperately needed the community support of the Synagogue. And so they tell the Pharisees that their son is of age, so go talk to him.

Off go the Pharisees. They find the guy. They still can’t reconcile everything they know. They know a miracle took place. The evidence is right in front of them. But He did it on the Sabbath! So He’s a sinner! But we’re talking to a guy who was blind from birth and now he can see. But, but… Back and forth they go over the story until the man born blind says to them, “Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples too?” Let’s call this section of the story ‘**Just deal with it!’** And so they do. They deal with it, but not the way we might hope. In order to protect their understanding of what it means to honor the Sabbath, in order to preserve their traditions, they condemn the most amazing, most beautiful thing I’m sure any of them have ever seen in their life. “You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us,” they shout to the man, and they throw him out of their presence. Remember the question the disciples asked Jesus to begin this whole story? *Who sinned, this man or his parents?* We know what the Pharisees think.

And so we come to the final scene. Let’s call this section **“Coming Home.”** Jesus hears about what happened. He goes to find the man. “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” That’s another way of asking do you believe in the Messiah. “Who is he, sir?” the man asked. “Tell me so that I may believe in him.” He wants to see, to really see. Jesus says, ‘You are talking to Him.’ And what is the man’s response? He believes and worships. There is one final exchange between Jesus and the Pharisees that confirms that they don’t want to see, and the story ends.

So do you remember the questions I asked you to think about at the beginning? *What kind of relationship do you have with Jesus? Is there anything you know of that that is holding you back from a deeper and more fruitful relationship with Him? If there were something like this, something holding you back, something keeping you from falling more deeply into His arms, would you want to know what it is?* We’ve just finished a story about denial, confusion, loopholes, shooting the messenger, intimidation and so on. Do you really want to know if anything like this could be applied to you and your relationship with Jesus or your understanding about who He is and what He has done? Is there someplace where we are in denial like the neighbors? Stubborn like the Pharisees? Or afraid like the parents? What’s holding us back? Do we want to know?

Let me if I can’t sharpen these questions a little bit. A few days ago, as I was wrestling with this chapter, I came across a quote from Dallas Willard. If you’ve been here for a while you’ve heard the name, Dallas Willard, before. Dallas died a couple years ago but for me he remains one of the smartest and deepest believers I have ever read. Take a look at this quote. It’s on the front cover of your bulletin. Dallas writes, “No one can have an adequate view of the *heart and purposes* of the GOD OF THE UNIVERSE who does not understand that *He permitted His Son to die on the cross* to reach out to ALL PEOPLE, even people who *hated* Him. THAT IS WHO GOD IS.”

Can you imagine someone responding to this statement like this: ‘That can’t be true, it goes too far, or makes too high a claim.’ I can. And yet look at it closely. Dallas doesn’t say you can’t believe in God if you don’t believe this. He says the cross of Christ is the key to an “adequate view of the heart and purposes of God.” The Pharisees believed in God; they just didn’t see, or didn’t want to see what He was doing right in front of them. Dallas knows that the cross of Christ can be the same kind of stumbling block to people today that this miracle was to the people in the story. And it isn’t the only stumbling block. For others it’s the resurrection, or the miracles, or the divinity of Jesus.

So I return to my questions. What kind of relationship do you have with Jesus? Is there anything you know of that that is holding you back from a deeper and more fruitful relationship with Him? If there was something like this, something holding you back, something keeping you from falling more deeply into His arms, would you want to know what it is? And would you want to know what to do about it?

If you think you would like to spend some time with the Lord and these questions I have a suggestion. There are four weeks until Easter, two weeks yet in March and two in April. And it just so happens that there are four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Anyone see where I’m going with this? What if you made a commitment to read one Gospel each week between now and Easter? Do you think this might help you to address some of the questions I’ve asked this morning? Do you think that doing this might increase your understanding of the heart and purposes of the God of the universe? Do you think it might draw you deeper into the mystery and beauty of God’s love for all people? Do you think that spending the time you are going to spend reading all four Gospels might be better than the time you would ordinarily spend say watching television, or surfing the web, or\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_?

[Epilogue] After this message was completed something happened. One of our members, Jaleh, prays with Herman and me before we go into the service. Yesterday she told us she was going to pray for something different. As she was preparing her prayers for us she felt the Lord leading her to pray for…wait for it…***the congregation to spend more time in the Bible between now and Easter***. I’m not making this up. Jaleh said she it was like the feeling or instruction just “descended” on her. Is God good or what!]

Jesus healed a man, blind from birth, on the Sabbath. What will you do with that, and everything else He did? Let’s pray…