

WHY? Lent 4
Why Heal the Blind?
March 2nd, 2008
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John 9:1-11

As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' Jesus answered, 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. ⁴We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. ⁵As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.' When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, 'Go, wash in the pool of Siloam' (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. The neighbours and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, 'Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?' Some were saying, 'It is he.' Others were saying, 'No, but it is someone like him.' He kept saying, 'I am the man.' But they kept asking him, 'Then how were your eyes opened?' ¹¹He answered, 'The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, "Go to Siloam and wash." Then I went and washed and received my sight.'

This Lent, as we journey through the wilderness and make preparations for Easter, we're asking the questions, "why" and wrestling with questions about faith and the Christian life. Steve began the series by asking and wrestling with the question, "Why Jesus?" In the second week he looked at the miracles of Jesus in general and asked, "Why perform miracles?" Last week then we looked at one of the first miracles Jesus performed and asked the question – "Why turn water into wine?" As we looked at that miracle metaphorically, we found an incredible depth of meaning that speaks to us about what it means for us to live as Christ's followers in the world today.

This morning we turn to another miracle found in the gospel of John, the miracle of Jesus healing the blind man. This miracle is found at the very beginning of the 9th chapter of John. Before we look at this morning's text, it is worth noting that the 8th chapter of John does not end well. Jesus has been in a conversation that gets heated and

some of his partners in the dialogue begin to throw stones at him. The closing line of that 8th chapter of John tells us that Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.

Immediately following this we read in chapter 9:

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Jesus and his disciples are walking along their way and they come across a man who is blind, a man who has been blind since birth. This detail is often passed over, but is, in fact, quite significant. The conventional belief during the time of Jesus was that a person would be blind or crippled or ill because they were being punished for their sins. However, since this individual had been blind since birth, it raised an interesting question. Who had sinned? Had this man? Had his parents? And Jesus answers in a way that breaks down the conventional understanding of the time, "neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's work might be revealed in him."

Now, before we go too much further, I want to pause for a point of clarification. Stories like this one can be and are often used to make the case for a God who is a manipulative God who likes to play games with us. This man was born blind so that the works of God can be revealed through him? If we follow this line of reasoning to one of

it's logical conclusions we can end up with a belief system where God intentionally makes people be blind, or deaf, or crippled, so that at some point God can use that person to teach a lesson or make a point. This paints a very dangerous portrayal of God, one that I want to be clear to speak against this morning.

An alternative way to understand Jesus' words in this passage would be this, this man was born blind, not because his parents sinned, not because he sinned, but because things like this happen. We can't explain why people are born blind, or deaf, or crippled, but we know that they are. And when they are, we know that there is an opportunity for God's works to be revealed in these situations. This is an important distinction for us to keep in mind. God does not intentionally create some with abilities different than others. However, those who are born with alternate abilities provide opportunities for the works of God to be revealed.

In Jesus' day the conventional wisdom was that people were blind or suffered from disease or ailment because they were being punished for their sin. While we don't entirely adhere to this belief system today we operate in many of the same ways. If you've ever heard anyone say something like the following you've heard the remnants of this way of thinking: Poor people are poor because they're lazy. There are many variations of this – people in Africa are hungry because they're uncivilized, people in war torn areas are suffering because they are corrupt, however we frame the statement, the basic formula is the same, people who struggle do so for reasons that are their own fault.

But what if this wasn't the case? What if, in the same way that Jesus tells his disciples that neither the blind man nor his parents had sinned, he would have us hear and

understand today, that people who suffer around the world don't suffer because of things that they've done, but rather because of things that have been done to them?

What if, we are like the blind man in the story today, born into systems that keep our eyes closed? What if the call of Jesus on our lives today is to open our eyes so that we may see the world as it truly is? How would this begin to change the way we live our lives? Let's spend a few minutes addressing those questions this morning.

Our world today is full of a complex web of systems that work together to make sure that we'll continue keeping our eyes closed to a variety of things. Over the last year or so I've had my eyes opened to some realities in our world and I want to share these with you this morning because I believe that these are things that God and Jesus would want us to open our eyes toward. I will admit, when I first began learning about each of these I felt frozen and helpless – I felt overwhelmed, over time though, I found my eyes opened to ways in which I could begin to make changes in my life that could impact these situations. To use some familiar words from a beloved hymn, I once was blind, but now I see.”

Not quite a year ago Heather and I sat down to watch Al Gore's film, “An Inconvenient truth.” I was shocked to learn about some of the things that we are doing to our planet and finished the film with this overwhelming feeling that changes needed to be made in our world and the realization that many of them needed to start in my own life. Heather and I did some research and decided that one step we would take would be to buy carbon offsets in the form of renewable energy credits. Using a company called Native Energy you can calculate your greenhouse gas emissions for the year and

contribute financial resources to offset a portion or all of those gases. After our eyes were opened Heather and I knew that we had to do something and so we've been making small contributions to wind energy.

This fall one of the Ridge Youth asked me about taking the youth group to see a documentary about the humanitarian crisis in Darfur. We talked about it and decided that it might be hard to coordinate that trip around Thanksgiving and Christmas, but decided to put together a program for the youth group on a Sunday night. I have to be honest, going into our preparations for the program I really didn't know a great deal about the situation in the Darfur. I was shocked to learn about what is happening, about the ways in which the government is turning a blind eye and in some ways even supporting the rebels, about the way in which tens of thousands of people are suffering, and about the ways in which so many of the systems in our world are interrelated with what is happening there. I will continue to talk about and teach about the crisis and to share the information that I learned with others.

Just this last weekend I had the opportunity to have my eyes opened to the realities of hunger and poverty in our community and in our world. The Ridge Youth held a 30-hour famine lock-in to raise awareness of hunger issues, to work to overcome those issues in our community, and to raise money for the issue globally. Over the course of the weekend we went for 30 hours without eating. During that time of experiencing hunger we talked about hunger, volunteered at the Food Bank of Northwest Indiana, and raised funds to support World Vision's work with hungry children in Africa. I was shocked as I was reminded of the fact that approximately 6 million children die of hunger

every year, that more than 100,000 people in Lake and Porter counties live below the poverty level and that nearly half of those are kids under the age of 18. I will continue to look for opportunities to help feed the hungry in our community as well as to provide food and care for people throughout the world.

Whether we choose to contribute financially, to help with education and awareness, or to dedicate our time and our energy, Jesus calls us to open our eyes to address the needs of the world around us. Many Christians of good conscience think that having faith in Jesus is about having comfort and security for ourselves. It is about much more than that though. In the Lord's prayer we pray to *our* father, not to my father. God is god of all, all people, all of creation. And we pray that God's kingdom might come on earth as it is in heaven. If we really mean that, we must open our eyes to the things that happening around us in the world.

Again, having faith in Jesus is not just about feeling safe and secure in ourselves and in our future. Having faith in Jesus comes with a call to have our eyes opened to the realities of the world and to find ways to use our gifts to address those needs. Our faith in Jesus can cure us of the blindness in which we live and help open our eyes as we read and study scripture, as we live and grow in community, and as we spend time praying and growing in our relationship with God.

I recently had my eyes opened and was greatly challenged and inspired by Brian McLaren's new book, "Everything Must Change." McLaren argues that we are currently living in the midst of what he calls a suicide machine, a system that leads to death and destruction for human beings and for the environment. According to McLaren, we are so

integrated into this machine that we aren't even really aware of its existence. The call of Jesus can help us have our eyes opened and can help us begin to ask difficult questions.

Hear these words of challenge from McLaren:

Socially, in this economy we consume time and produce fatigue, consume art and talent and produce entertainment and amusement, consume work and leisure and produce paychecks and heart attacks. And ultimately we consume communities and produce extended families, consume extended families and produce nuclear families, consume nuclear families and produce individuals, consume individuals and produce consumers, and finally consume consumers themselves and produce disembodied fragments called "wants" and "needs" and "markets" and "segments" and "anxieties" and "drives" that the economy consumes and excretes and reconsumes in a kind of cannibalistic ferment or rot. In the process, we commonly produce successful megaconsumers of unimaginable wealth who are more or less bankrupt in compassion for their poor neighbors. And in a stroke of suicidal genius we simultaneously produce poor people whose greatest dream is to be like those megaconsumers who don't care at all about them.

May we all, follow the way of Jesus and see that life is about so much more than simply being happy and comfortable and safe. May we have our eyes opened to see things the way they are and May God guide open our eyes to show us how we might be a part of the solution to these and other travesties in the world.