

The Blame Game

A Sunday Morning Message at UCC Westerly, Pawcatuck, CT

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John 9:1-12

Rev. Ruth Shilling Hainsworth

All four Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – have stories about Jesus healing a blind man and, remarkably, these stories do have some similarities but also key differences. So immediately I have to ask myself – were there really four different encounters with a blind man? Or, was there one encounter with a blind man that the Gospel writers each recounted differently? This is always the quintessential question confronting us whenever we engage with studying the Bible, especially in the Gospels – are two or more different stories with similar focal points talking about the same event, or different events? This is one way to go deeper, to explore, the Scriptures more purposely.

The story I chose for our focus today comes from John’s Gospel for the simple reason that this is the Lectionary text for this Sunday. In this story, Jesus encounters the blind man as he is “walking along.” It doesn’t say where he is walking along in this part of the text nor in the parts surrounding it. The key takeaway is that Jesus encountered the man. The man did not seek Jesus out himself. And, even as Jesus encounters this man, he engages with him not because of anything the man says or does. He engages with him because the disciples, walking along with him, ask a question that to us sounds more than a little peculiar: “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” In other words, the disciples upon encountering this disabled man, immediately wanted to affix blame for his condition on someone. To be fair, in this place and time – ancient Palestine 2000+ years ago – illnesses and chronic conditions were usually ascribed to some supernatural cause, like sin or evil spirits. So, this comment was not so odd then as it sounds to us today. What would have been surprising to those people then was Jesus’ answer. He said, “Neither

this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him." Yikes! That doesn't sit well with us either even though it was, supposedly at least, what Jesus said. We just don't think of Jesus as being so cavalier about someone's suffering as to say it happened so that Jesus could make a show of healing him. Truthfully, that doesn't sound much better than the "he's blind because his parents sinned" reason. But it's the answer we have, at least according to John.

So, what comes next, in John's telling of the story? Well, Jesus makes some reference to being the light of the world and then he makes a paste of his spit and mud to rub on the man's eyes, after which he instructs the man to go and wash off the mud in the pool of Siloam. He does as Jesus directs him and then he can see. He returns to Jesus and at once the neighbors who knew him only as a blind beggar, began questioning just what was going on. Was it really him, now able to see, or was it someone else who only bore some resemblance to the blind beggar? Again, to be fair, if you have ever known someone born blind, you know their appearance is usually quite different from a sighted person. Their eyes are often smaller and deeper set in the face, and unfocused making it pretty easy to recognize their vision disability. So, it could be believable that some people just didn't recognize the healed man. Still, they kept asking how it was that he could see again, so he explained what Jesus had done. Not surprisingly, they wanted to find Jesus but the man could only say he did not know where Jesus had gone. In John this evolves into a whole big thing with the Pharisees to whom this miraculous healing was reported. They were concerned and, frankly, worried about Jesus – what he was teaching, what he was doing and who he was healing. If you read through the rest of Chapter 9, it is clear that they believe the man was blind because of his sin. Therefore, in order to heal him, Jesus must have forgiven the man's sin, which, at least according to the orthodoxy of the Pharisees, Jesus did not have the

authority to do. Not even close. What's really interesting is that it became such a big deal that Jesus heard about it and he comes back to talk with the man again. He asks the healed man if he believes in "the Son of Man," a euphemism sometimes used to refer to Jesus. Once he realizes Jesus is the Son of Man, he states his emphatic belief. This in turn leads to a brief conversation between Jesus and a few of the Pharisees about sin, the gist of it being that Jesus makes clear that the Pharisees' unwillingness to see their own rigidity in their faith to be sin as a kind of blindness that he cannot heal. Only they can but letting go of all that is holding them back from believing in Jesus.

Wow! That's a lot! And all from this one brief encounter between Jesus and a blind man. But what about those encounters with a blind man described in the other Gospels? Are they describing the same blind man or not? In Matthew, the story is much shorter – only 5 verses. In this story there are two blind men, not one, and they are chasing after Jesus begging to be healed. Jesus turns and asks them point blank if they believe he can heal them and they said, "yes." So, Jesus "touched their eyes and said, 'according to your faith let it be done to you.'" Now this is interesting in that he sort of turns the tables on them when they say they believe he can heal them. He agrees to heal them, "according to your faith." In other words, if they really, truly believe he is able to heal him, they will be healed. And they were. Before leaving, he tells them not to tell anyone what he has done.

Mark's version is my favorite, by far because it's one of the only times when Jesus checks with the person to make sure the healing worked. In this story, the blind man is brought to Jesus by a group of people, presumably his friends and family, and beg Jesus to heal him. Jesus then took the blind man, led him a little way outside the village and put his own saliva on the man's eyes. Then he asked the man if he could see anything to which the man replies, "I can see people but they look like trees walking." So, Jesus lays hands on him again, and this time the man's sight was restored. He sent the man home with

instructions to go home but not go back to the village. Again, Jesus seems to want this healing to remain a secret.

Then, at last we have Luke's version of Jesus' encounter with the blind man. In this story, the blind man is sitting beside the road on the way to Jericho when he realized there was some sort of commotion going on. He asked someone what was happening and was told "Jesus of Nazareth is passing by." Immediately the man started shouting "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" The people around the blind man told him to be quiet but he only cried out louder so that Jesus stopped, and asked that the man be brought to him. Jesus then asked him, what do you want me to do for you? And the man answered, "Lord, let me see again." Jesus said in return, "Receive your sight, your faith has saved you." Immediately the man regained his sight and followed Jesus rejoicing as all the people who saw this miracle praised God.

Hmmm. So now we have some understanding of the four stories of Jesus' healing a blind man. Is it the same man? Or not? It's true that two stories – the ones in Matthew and John give no specific geographic location but Mark and Luke give very specific and very different locations. No help there. In two of the stories Jesus just encounters the blind man, and in two, the blind man and/or his friends actively seek Jesus out to ask for healing. It's also true that in two stories – Matthew and Mark – Jesus is very clear that the blind man is not to talk about what happened to anyone. In John, Jesus himself uses this situation as a teaching moment with the Pharisees so that "don't tell anyone" doesn't hold in John. So too in Luke where the healing is witnessed by many, all of whom rejoiced in it. Again, such different outcomes. Even the means of the healing itself differs from story to story. In John, Jesus makes a paste of mud and his own saliva to put on the man's eyes with instructions to wash it off in the pool of Siloam to be healed. In Matthew, Jesus lays hands on the two beggars'

eyes to heal them. In Mark, Jesus puts his own saliva on the man's eyes and in Luke, Jesus heals using only his words.

Yikes! When we stop and look at these stories side by side, we quickly see that the only real commonality among them all is that a *blind man* (or men) is healed. How he (in one case they) were healed is different in each. Where they were healed in the geographic sense does not seem to be the same place. And the aftermath of the healing is markedly different – sometimes there is rejoicing and sometimes there is only an admonition to “tell no one.” Is it the same blind man being healed? Possible, but there is no way to really tell which leaves us to go back once again and look more closely at the story in the text for today in John's Gospel. What is unique about John's recounting of this text is now very clear. John's story about the healing of the blind man is the only one which attempts to affix blame for what made the blind man blind in the first place. Or, put another way, sin caused this man's blindness in the first place implying that if there had been no sin there would have been no blind man needing healing.

If only life were that simple. If it were possible to figure out who or what is to blame for blindness or any kind of illness, really, one might jump to the conclusion that it would be possible to avoid the illness all together. And thanks to modern medicine, that is in fact true for a number of illnesses. Or ... is it? Yes, modern medicine tells us that if we smoke cigarettes, we'll probably get cancer and that if we eat a fatty diet, we'll probably die early from heart disease. Our unhealthy diets can also lead to early colon cancer and all kinds of other health problems. Just figuring out what to eat can be guilt inducing in our society! Honestly, if you're anything like me, you're constantly blaming yourself because you are convinced by all the media hype that you are doing something, knowingly or unknowingly, all the time to diminish your long range good health prospects.

And we don't just feel guilty about our, at times, lax responses to our own health. We can feel just as guilty, just as willing to affix blame

on someone, for all that's wrong with us on a personal level, a spiritual level, even our own mental health. We tell ourselves, "If I wasn't so busy, I'd have time to exercise more ... to keep in better touch with my friends ... to help out at church like I'd like to." Or maybe it's "I wish I had more time to read the Bible, to really study it and learn how it can speak to me personally ... but I just don't have the time. I can't imagine how I could fit it in with everything else in my life." Yes, dear ones, the simple truth is that the blame game is real and we play it with ourselves every single day without even realizing. We know what we'd like to be doing, how we'd like to be investing our energies, even how we'd like to invest more in our relationship with Jesus. But – and that's the key word in the blame game – BUT – we just have no idea how to make the adjustments we'd need to make in our own lives to change things. Framed another way, we have no idea how to restructure or reframe our own lives in order to live life as we'd like to because we're too frazzled, fully occupied with just surviving from day to day. And so, the blame game cycle continues, even with our own physical well-being.

Dear ones, we live in a crazy, fragile, frightening world. And that world is getting crazier and more frightening with every passing day. None of us signed up for the mess we are living through right now yet here we are, struggling just to figure out how to get through each day without a full blown panic attack. And we too easily fall into the blame game thinking erroneously that if we can just figure out where it all went wrong, if we can blame someone for all this mess, that will be the next step to restoring our sanity and our joy for living. Unfortunately, dear ones, that is never going to happen. It's never going to happen for the simple reason that the blame belongs everywhere. And, simultaneously, while key people are certainly extremely problematic right now, the blame for how we got here belongs with no one person or situation. Things as they are right now took almost 100 years to reach this point and that's a completely different sermon! Our take-

away from today about all this mess it to accept that it will not be easy or simple to set things right again because we have to be able to move beyond the blame game for that to happen. Accountability? Yes absolutely! Affixing blame? Understandable but where would this blame game stop? That's the problem with the blame game – there's never a clear stopping point. Left unchecked it just goes on and on.

So where does that leave us? The same place the blind man from whichever Gospel story you prefer found himself – in an impossible situation through no fault of his own seeking a new way of seeing, of relating to the world, in which he lived. Dear ones, we can do exactly what he did – ask Jesus for healing in this situation: Healing for ourselves, in body, mind and spirit. Healing for our loved ones. Healing for our society and our world. And, perhaps most importantly, new insights into how we can make a difference – however small that might be – as each day unfolds. Jesus made the blind see once more. He can give us new vision and renewed strength for the living of these days too. We have but to ask. Amen.