

## **Let God Be God**

John 9:1-41

March 2, 2008

Sermon preached by Rev. Donald Ng at the First Chinese Baptist Church in San Francisco.

The last time we watched our older grandchildren, Evi and Gavin, they fought for turf on the sofa. One would begin to edge over to the other's cushion and infringe on the other's space. They would continue to do this with each of them crying out as the victim. As their voices rise in decibels and the whining match turns ugly, we realized they were waiting for us to decide. Whose fault is it that first started this turf war?

A young couple sits down in the doctor's office, waiting for her report. They have been trying for two years to get pregnant, with no success; now, they want to know why. Last week they came in for a battery of tests that will begin to give them some answers, but as the doctor sees the tension in their faces, how they are unable to look at one another or hold hands, she knows how the couple is framing their questions. Whose fault is it, that they can't have a baby?

It's been many years since you were all together. Your friendships started when you all graduated from college about the same time. Everyone is there—everyone except Earl and Sylvia. "Aren't they coming?" you ask, and your friends shake their heads, sadly. "I guess you haven't heard," says one; "Earl and Sylvia are getting a divorce." You sit in stunned silence. What happened?" And there is that question again, "Whose fault is it, that this marriage didn't last?"

When my two brothers in their young adult years suddenly collapsed and died of heart attacks in about 6 years apart, my mother couldn't believe what happened. She asked herself, "What have I done? What did I do wrong?" Her guilt caused her to ask, "How did I cause this? What did I do in my past that caused God to punish me with the loss of my sons?" Whose fault is it that my brothers suddenly died in the prime years of their lives?

It's a human instinct to find fault. Maybe it's a coping mechanism to keep the great void of mystery at bay. If we know whose fault it is, at least we have a way to understand what has happened. At least we have a way to explain our part in it. Even better, we may find a way to excuse our part in it—which is to say, put the responsibility or blame squarely on someone's shoulders. If our only job is to find out whose fault it is, we can be assured of some blaming satisfaction: someone will pay for what went wrong.

It's like who in their right mind would smash the windows of our display cases? If we can come up with a name or perhaps even a profile of the perpetrator, we can determine whose fault it was and begin to blame this person for the damages.

## **Man Born Blind**

Jesus and his disciples were walking and came upon a man blind from birth. Out of curiosity, the disciples asked Jesus, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" It doesn't appear obvious that they were looking to lay blame on either the man or his parents. Maybe they were just curious when they saw him along the way.

It's a fair question to ask Jesus because in their minds, blindness equals sickness, sickness equals sin, and sin equals human fault. So who is at fault that caused this man to be born blind—the man or his parents?

After Jesus made some mud and spread it on the man's eyes, the man went to a pool to wash it off. Once he did that he came back able to see. But look at what happens afterward for the rest of the 34 verses in this chapter. They had a theological debate.

First, the man's neighbors and those who knew him as a beggar asked, "Is this really the man we knew from birth and the one who used to sit and beg? Next, the Pharisees refuted what happened because Jesus healed the man on the Sabbath and anyone who worked on the Sabbath must be a sinner. Next, they called in the man's parents and while the parents claimed him as their son, declined to defend him and said, "Why don't you ask him; he's old enough?" Next, they called the man back for more questioning and debating and eventually threw him out calling him out of order. And finally, the Pharisees argued with Jesus on who was really blind after all—the Pharisees or the man.

While his disciples would have liked to have a knock-down-dragged-out debate about the man's suffering and who was to be blamed for his blindness, Jesus refuses to debate them. He simply reaches out and heals the man. Jesus seems not to care for abstract theological speculation. He cares for the man in his need.

### **Asking Why**

It's like when I get sick and end up with a bad cold or perhaps the flu. But I make it to church and apologize for my horrible sore throat or nagging cough when I talk. So I get through the worship service and people with very good intentions are launching into conversations about the origins of sore throats or that this year's flu vaccine was only 30% effective against the flu strains or that people should just take better care of themselves. What I wanted was just a little bit of sympathy, not a debate on how the pharmaceutical companies failed this year with the flu vaccine or that I failed to take care of myself and not have any one to blame but myself for my sore throat.

We can spend our whole lives on the "five—Ds": death, disease, depression, divorce, and disaster. We like to ask the "why" question about everything we don't have an answer for. Why did he suffer? Why did she suffer? Why do we suffer? Why would God allow such suffering to happen in this world? Asking the "why" question is not doing us any good. Until we stop asking, "Why? Why? Why?" we would always be frozen in time and begin to perish.

There comes a point when we spiritually surrender and we say, "OK, God, if I can't know why, then at least help me figure out what's next." That's when spiritual growth begins to happen—when we move out of the "why" and into the "what now."

I will never know why my mother had to suffer through the death of her sons. This "why" question can't be answered; and unfortunately for her, she became stuck with this question. She became frozen in time. But fortunately for me, these events happened when I was studying to become a minister. In fact, it was during the summer that I register for my Clinical Pastoral Education when for three months I served first as a hospital orderly and then as a chaplain at a chronically ill hospital in Massachusetts, that I moved from "why" to "what now." My professors and pastoral counselors and fellow students helped me to see that this "why" question can't be answered. I started to ask the question, "What's next?"

The movement from the “why” to the “what’s next” can be seen in this story of the man born blind. The disciples were fixated on the “why”: who was to blame, who sinned, that this man was born blind? There must be a reason why it happened. What was it? But Jesus refuses to perpetuate the blame-game. Instead, Jesus speaks of God’s will to minister to those who suffer. He gets down in the mud with the man and he heals him.

### **Let God be God**

The truth of this story is that Jesus is Lord. Jesus has come to heal and save. He is the light of the world! When the disciples try to press him to explain why bad things happen to people and why he is able to put things right, Jesus makes it clear that it is his authority that makes these things to happen. In other words, Jesus is in charge of the “why” question—“he was born blind so that God’s work might be revealed in him.” It is not the disciple’s place to understand the mind of God. Let God be God.

Sometimes, in our attempts to comfort others, we Christians fall prey to the same temptation as the disciples. We think it is our job to answer the “why” question. How many of us have heard horror stories of suffering people being told by well-meaning Christians, “God must have a plan for you. This happened for a reason!” That may well be true, but it is not for us to say. The answer is not for any one of us to give, or at least not to give with such absolute assurance. We don’t know. Only Jesus Christ knows the “why.”

When my brothers died, I could only say, “God works in mysterious ways and while I don’t know the mind of God, I just need to have faith that God is in this too.” Let God be God.

### **What Now**

As for the blind man, he had no intention of staying in the “why.” He eagerly moves to the “what now.” In the past, everyone had wanted to know why he was blind. Now everyone wanted to know why he is healed. He has no answer to either. All he can offer is the facts: “He put mud on my eyes, and I washed, and I see.”

The tragic figures in this story are the Pharisees. Instead of seeing a miracle of divine grace in the healing of the blind man, they saw a theological problem, a point to be debated. As the formerly blind man endures their questioning, he comes closer and closer to the truth about Jesus, while his interrogators resist more and more. Unlike the Pharisees, the man doesn’t mind admitting what he doesn’t know—he doesn’t know where Jesus is, or whether it’s accurate to call him a sinner. There’s only one thing he knows for sure, that once he was blind and now he can see. As he is forced to repeat this truth, he gradually arrives at the truth about the man who has given him his sight: first he’s just a man named Jesus, then he’s a prophet, then he is “from God,” and finally he is “Lord.” The man’s eyes are opened even wider now; he sees in every sense of the word.

What can we see in every sense of the word? Would we continue to be frozen in the “why” question of life and be unable to ask, “what now?”

Jesus’ answer catches all of us off guard. “No one sinned. He was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.” No blame. No fault. Just an opportunity for God to be seen and be known. Let God just be God in this situation.

What amazes me is how Jesus changes the subject. Who sinned, this man or his parents? No one sinned. No one is the cause of this. No one is the subject, here—except God, and what God might do in this situation. For me, this changes everything.

Whose fault is it, that Evi and Gavin were fighting over turf on the sofa? No one's fault. No one is the subject, here—except God, and what God might do in this situation. So, Evi and Gavin should look at each other and ask, “What do you think God is doing, here? How can we help to get along and be loving siblings?”

Whose fault is it, that this couple cannot conceive a child? No one's fault. No one is the subject, here—except God, and what God might do now. So, this couple would need to ask what they think God is doing, here? How can they be a part of it?

Whose fault is it that this marriage ended? No one's fault. No one is the subject, here—except God, and what God might do here. So, what do you think God is doing, here? How can we enter into this situation and see how we might support these hurting friends.

Whose fault is it, that my mother lost her sons unexpectedly? No one's fault. No one is the subject, here—except God, and what God might do here. So, I must look around and ask what I think God is doing, here.

For me, in some very mysterious and perhaps tragic way according to human terms, the passing of my brothers became events in my life to trust God even more than I have done in the past. I think that when I realized that my life was not going to end so prematurely as theirs'; at that point, I believe that God saved my life so that I might obey him as a servant in full-time ministry. I know no other way but to give my life to the Lord. I believe that is what God was doing here.

At that point and for the past 33 years of being in the ministry, I let God be God in my life. Let God be God in your life and you can finally let go of the “why” question so that you can hear “what's next.”

Let us pray.

Dear Lord, we confess that we are trapped in our own need to answer all the questions of life. We confess we find it easier to try to solve things ourselves rather than to ask for any help. We confess that we find it easier to pretend that we have all the answers when we really don't. Lord, lead us to trust you with the questions of life that we can't answer for ourselves so that we may become freed to ask, “what's next.” O God, help us and forgive us to see you instead of only seeing ourselves, to understand you instead of just our limited world in which we live. We pray in Jesus our hope and who showed us the way to true wisdom. Amen.