

## **Sermons at St. Luke's**

*A sermon preached by The Rev. Joseph H. Hensley, Jr. on Sunday, April 3, 2011.*

(I Samuel 16:1-13; Ephesians 5:8-14; John 9:1-41)

Let's hear again these words from the Gospel according to John, a few of the many words from the Gospel according to John, this morning. "As he walked along, Jesus 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." Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed. God's works might be revealed. Revelation. Jesus came to reveal God's works so that we might believe. The disciples want to know who sinned, but Jesus wants to know who believes in the power of God.

At first hearing, it might sound like Jesus is saying that God caused the man to be born blind just so that God's works could be revealed. And this is troubling to us because we don't want to believe in a God who would inflict the life of a blind beggar on someone just to make a point. I suppose that that's possible because all things are possible with God, but I don't believe that's how God works. When Jesus says the man was born blind so that God's works might be revealed, Jesus is really responding to the question that the disciples asked, "Who sinned?" Jesus is putting it in their framework. The disciples are looking for the cause of the man's suffering. Someone must have angered God in order for the man to end up this way. But I think the point of Jesus' response is to say "You're asking the wrong question." The question is not "Who sinned?" The question is "How is God going to work? Where is God at work in this situation?" And whatever the cause of the man's blindness, God is going to cause the man's healing to be a sign for faith.

In Jesus' time it was common for people to think that illness was caused by sins. That God afflicted those who had gone against the will of God. And certainly the Bible has stories about God punishing those who go astray. In our Old Testament lesson today from First Samuel, we hear that God has rejected King Saul as being king of Israel. You may remember in the story that Saul had been given explicit instructions through the prophet Samuel, and because Saul feared the people and he was disobedient to God, God makes Saul an enemy, anointing David as the new king. We hear about God rejecting and afflicting people. It makes a lot of people want to avoid the Old Testament. These kind of stories make us wonder when suffering happens to us or to others say, "God, are you angry with me?"

Now, I can't say for certain how God works, none of us can. I can't say for sure that God does not cause human suffering sometimes. God is greater and more mysterious than I'll ever know. Jim Craven said last week, "I just work here." What's clear to me is that God's love for us exceeds any anger God might have. God sent Christ to reveal God's abundant love and mercy. And if you look at the Old Testament, you can see that God's love and mercy is all over the place. But we tend to focus on the punishment. We, like the disciples, want to know who sinned, who messed up? The disciples are blind to any possibility other than that this man or his

parents must have done something wrong. They see a man blind and their first thing is to say, "Well, gosh, somebody messed up." Jesus invites a different question. How will God reveal God's glory here? Where is the possibility of a miracle? Where is there hope? Where can sight and faith be found in the midst of blindness?

How have we been like the disciples? Where have we been more concerned with whose fault it was and who sinned than we have been concerned with healing? You know, we do this to ourselves all the time. Who sinned, me or my parents, that I'm as screwed up as I am? And we do it to other people. Who sinned, the poor or their parents who were poor before them? Who sinned, the child who acts out because of mental illness or the mother who did drugs while pregnant? Who sinned, the Mexican immigrant child or its parents who brought it over the border? Who sinned? Who's to blame? We can assign some guilt. And it's easier for us to think that, well, we don't really have to get involved because this person obviously did something to deserve their fate. If a homeless man is homeless because he was somehow irresponsible, then maybe I feel a little less guilty about walking in the other direction. If a young person is murdered in East Durham because they were out at the wrong time of night doing the wrong sorts of things, it's a little bit easier for us to say, "Well, I guess there's some justice in there somewhere."

Jesus comes to open our eyes to that kind of blindness. Jesus says, "Instead of asking who sinned, I want you to get involved." Jesus sees the man blind from birth and he sets to work even when it's controversial. You remember he healed on the Sabbath. Got him into some trouble. He makes mud and gives the man his sight without even being asked. We pray that Jesus might give us sight. That we might ask more than just who sinned. That we might see how we might be a part of God's revealing work.

I read a really inspiring story about a little mission Episcopal church on the Oregon coast called St. Timothy's in a town called Brookings. It's a little fishing town. Half a day after the tsunami hit Japan a few weeks ago, the wave traveled 5,000 miles and pummeled the Oregon coast, and the port in Brookings was demolished. Now, for this working class fishing town with 12 percent unemployment at the height of the fishing season of crab season this was a major blow. Fishing boats, which for some families are their homes in this town, were destroyed. And it would have been tempting for the people of Brookings to say, "What have we done to deserve this? Who sinned? Why, God, are you punishing us?" But the people of St. Timothy's Episcopal Church asked themselves, "Where can God be at work here? How can we get involved in what God is doing?" This mission -- it's not even big enough to be a parish -- they happen to have a relationship with a local motor lodge, and so they arranged for temporary housing for some 20 families that were displaced by the wave. They paid for four bus tickets to get some folks to relatives out of town. They paid to have five boats towed out of the water for repairs. This is not a wealthy or large congregation, but somehow they got involved and somehow God's work was being revealed.

After reading this story, I looked up St. Timothy's to find out a little more and found out that not only did they respond in a time of disaster, they also operate a weekly soup kitchen and a medical clinic that is free one afternoon a week in their church basement. And I imagine that when people come to the clinic because they lack medical insurance, they don't get asked, "Well,

what did you do wrong? What did you do to deserve this? Who sinned?" No, the people of St. Timothy's simply offer to help in the name of Christ. And when we help each other in the name of Christ, then God's works are being revealed.

There's an organization here in Durham called the Religious Coalition for Non-Violent Durham. And part of what they do is when murders are committed in our city, they organize a prayer vigil at the site of the murder, and they bring together family and friends and people from the community to pray in the places where deadly violence occurs. A lot of these murders happen because somebody was in the wrong place at the wrong time doing the wrong thing. And it would be easy to say, "Well, that person sinned. And somehow perhaps they deserved what they got." But the Religious Coalition says we're going to be a part of what God is doing here. We're going to gather together in prayer at the place where this horrible thing happened, and we're going to ask God to show us how to open the eyes of our community to the violence that is around us. This Wednesday I've been asked to lead one of these vigils, and if you are available to join us at 5:30 on Wednesday at the end of North Driver Street, the 1500 block, we will join together in prayer, not knowing how God will lead us, but hoping and praying and believing that God is at work somewhere somehow.

Can we see God working in such things? Can we see God working in the people of St. Timothy's Brookings? Can we see God working amongst ourselves here at St. Luke's when we help out, when we reach out in faith? When we have the privilege of serving one another in the name of Christ, it's important that we tell these stories in the name of faith. Not to brag over ourselves as healers or helpers, but to build our faith that God is the one who bestows the will and the strength to help at all. It's not the healing that's the focus of this morning's Gospel, it's the faith. At the end of the story, the blind man receives his faith. He comes to believe that God has sent a savior, and this savior has come to save us from our blindness to the mercy of God, from our blindness to the possibility that God is at work. Jesus comes to save us from constantly asking, "Who sinned? Who's at fault? Who deserves punishment?" To save us and open our eyes, to bestow grace upon us that we might be led to actually reveal what God is doing. We don't have to be stuck in a game of blame, says Jesus.

We're a little over halfway through Lent. We're supposed to be looking at ourselves, at our sins. In addition to looking at the particular things we might have done wrong, I want us to look at the general condition of our sight, our sinfulness in terms of how we get stuck in sin's game of blame. Where have we been blind seeing only guilt and deserved suffering? Where have we been blind to the possibility that God might be calling us to heal and relieve the pain of others? Where have we asked only, "Who sinned?" As Lent continues, I pray that God would give us the grace to see the works of God revealed, especially in works of mercy. Lord, have mercy upon us and open our eyes to see how we might participate in what you are doing. Open our eyes so that we and the whole world might come to believe.