

‘What in the world is RIGHT with this world?!’ Did that not quite go as you expected? That’s a phrase that typically ends in the exasperation of: ‘what is WRONG with this world?!’ Last week Sunday morning for my 6th-8th graders GIFT Class, we talked about ATONEMENT/ SALVATION (casual topics we cover in that class!). Over the years I’ve ebbed and flowed a bit with how I’ve introduced that ATONEMENT topic, but pretty much I’ve started by brainstorming with the youths asking: ‘what is wrong in the world?’ ‘what is sin?’ ‘How does God do something about sin?’ That’s made for interesting discussions. But as I prepared for last Sunday, I thought for the first time: how about if I start off by asking “what’s RIGHT in this world? – what’s good in this world?” I liked my idea (not unusual for me 😊) – and I went for it. I told those youths that I was starting this topic in a new way and that they were my guinea pigs – which they seemed to like – and it was great! They responded with: MUSIC; FAMILY; LOVE; LAUGHTER; NATURE; BOOKS; FRIENDS; JOY; PEACE. And we talked about those good things as how God made this world, made us, to be. It was really great.

Over this past week my colleagues and the Wednesday afternoon Bible Study Group will tell you that I have not been subtle (also not unusual for me 😊) in expressing how much I love today’s Gospel story from John 9. And I get very excited to preach on it. But I do also get a bit anxious about preaching – because there’s so much I want to say about it – and I want to say it right - so that you love it too!; which isn’t always so helpful. So I decided to tell you about that shift in how I started GIFT Class last week – and tell you that this story from John 9 is a big part of why that shift occurred to me – and invite you into this story to perhaps experience that shift along with me.

“As Jesus walked along, he saw a man blind from birth” - so the story begins – but really not where the story begins - for his whole life, this person has been defined by the reality that his eyes do not see: defined by the extreme physical challenge of his body in a world that is mostly sighted; but also defined spiritually, theologically – like this: “the disciples asked Jesus: ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’” Let’s just take a moment to let it sink in how utterly horrible this question is; how violent and demeaning it is. It is said that there are no bad questions – well this one is – it makes another person into an object, into an inanimate artifact to examine for theological debate. And remember, these are Jesus’ disciples! – saying this right there in front of this person: the cruelty of it is stunning. But it is a theological cruelty that the disciples of Jesus – which these days we call the Church – have far too often perpetuated - associating a physical disability with sin – with being less-than. Let that sink in.

“As Jesus walked along, he saw a man blind from birth” - ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ – and Jesus replies with something that is at once stunningly liberating and dangerously perplexing. First the stunningly liberating part: “Jesus answered, ‘neither this man nor his parents sinned’”. This is a theological declaration that rejects generations of ‘orthodox belief’ that clearly Jesus’ disciples were heirs to. This person who does not see: this. is. not. about. sin. Jesus rejects an entire warped theological paradigm - stunning. But then, Jesus (without consulting me 😊) goes on to say something dangerously perplexing: ‘he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed through him.’ Just as Jesus tears down one bad theology he seems to prop up another: of a God who goes around zapping people with painful issues, somehow for God’s glory? Well - I do not believe what Jesus says here is meant to support that bad theology of God throwing cosmic lightning bolts of pain – and I’m going to tell you why – a little later.

Alright – so we’re about halfway through the sermon, and we’re 3 verses into a 41 verse Gospel lesson – nervous? 😊 - no need to be - after a whole lot to comprehend in those first 3 verses, things really get rolling – and I’m going to summarize the next 31 verses in just a few sentences: Jesus puts some mud on the man’s eyes and cures him from blindness; people are surprised! – who did this?!; ‘that person Jesus did it’ the man says ‘with some mud!; the people take him to the Pharisees – they are surprised! – who did this?!; ‘that person Jesus, did it, with some mud!’; the Pharisees tell him that this can’t be correct, because making mud on the sabbath is a sin, so no good could come of that; the man says – ‘he seems like a prophet to me!’; the Pharisees say ‘let’s talk to his parents’; his parents say – ‘yikes! - don’t talk to us, talk to him!’; the Pharisees go back to the man: ‘don’t give credit to Jesus, give credit to God!’ The man says, ‘you-all seem

oddly obsessed with this Jesus person: do you want to be his disciples too?!’ The Pharisees curse him: ‘you are sin! – you are out of here!’ “And they drove him out.” Now we’re all the way to v.34!

So let's pause – and let's notice the profound reality that has unfolded in this story. What has happened is that the Pharisees – the religious folks – have had a disturbing truth exposed about them. These religious folks portray their religion as dealing with people's sins on God's behalf. in order to make people right with God – great! But the troublesome truth that starts to bubble up is that really their religion is about clinging to their power to exclude people from God. What everyone at that time would know, is that for his entire life the man who was blind had been excluded from the temple – because he was sin – and sin is excluded (can you imagine the pain of that? – maybe you can). But now he has sight! – so they bring him to the Pharisees to welcome him in to the temple, because now he meets the criteria! But that's when the twisted truth starts to get exposed: the Pharisees first have a problem with WHEN he received his sight- on the sabbath; then a problem with WHO was involved - an unauthorized healer; then a problem with WHAT the man now believes – his theology is incorrect. If this was really about sin, then this man getting his sight would settle it – but in the end they are right back to the beginning – 'you are sin and you are out of here!' The insidious truth exposed about the Pharisees is that if you define sin as defects that exclude us from God, then you'll always keep finding ways to keep others out. And just in case you think I'm just picking on the Pharisees – let's substitute the word 'Church' instead: a long and harmful legacy of defining defects in people – using gender and identity and race and ability as tools of exclusion. Let that sink in.

And then there is the end of the story. Jesus finds the man who has been driven out. The man who now sees - in all the literal and figurative senses of 'seeing' in this story – sees who Jesus is, worships Jesus. And Jesus concludes: 'I came here to turn upside down the way people see God and each other and the world – and some people aren't going to see it at all' And the Pharisees pop back in and say 'are you talking about us?!' – and Jesus says 'yup, I'm talking about you!'

What in the world is RIGHT in this world? When Jesus says that perplexing piece about "this person was born blind to bring glory to God" – it seems to me that Jesus is saying something like: 'Yes, this person was born blind – yes 'everything happens' (to quote author Kate Bowler) - but the question is – how can this life – how can each life – bring glory to God?' Whatever the reality, whatever the brokenness - to see a person as created to bring God's gifts into the world. That does not deny pain or struggle or sin – but God comes to us in Jesus Christ to say that all are created to be a part of God's new creation. God sees what is right for this world – that God created this world and each person to be a part of creating Beloved Community. What in the world is RIGHT in this world? What if that is what people expected to be asked and explored in this religious place?

I wonder how that sounds to you? I expect it sounds pretty good – but does it sound a bit too good? – maybe a bit too rose-colored sight? – a bit too progressive – liberal – woke – for the real world we live in? Well – I don't think so – I think, I experience, that it's actually very challenging to ask what's right. It can be much more clear-cut just to say who's in and who's out – to use the power of religion and nation and position to divide and control. It's a lot more challenging to seek paths of inclusion rather than exclusion – to use power to create rather than control. And there's one other part of this story that I noticed this week in a new way that I think makes that very clear. Because as much as I have explored this story, I haven't paid much attention to the parents. Do you recall what unfolds with them? When the religious leaders come to the parents to vouch for their son, the parents are afraid that if they stick up for him then the religious leaders will come after them. That got my attention this week: it's shocking – poignant – daunting – that at this moment of wholeness for their son, the parents know that inclusion has a cost.

So – we could judge them: ‘parents not sticking up for their own child! – awful.’ Or we could feel superior to them: ‘we would stand with the excluded – no matter the cost! – good for us!’ Or we could be honest. It is difficult – and sometimes scary – and sometimes costly – to speak for what is right in this world and for everyone having a place in that rightness. It is difficult - and sometimes we fail – or back down – or don’t speak up. And so perhaps what those parents missed was that they didn’t have to do this alone – even with their own son – it takes a community to have the courage to speak to what’s right in this world – because the powers of exclusion and brokenness are strong.

This past Friday I had the poignant blessing of attending at Hope College the memorial service for Dr. Fred Johnson. The service was powerful in many ways, and I carried from it Professor Johnson’s commitment and courage as a follower of Jesus Christ to speak the truth of inclusion and justice, because his faith was grounded in the belief and joy of what is right with God’s world. It is challenging to believe and strive for that rightness – we get scared and discouraged – we fail; we turn to Jesus and we are healed and we see. I want to be a part of the insistent inclusion Dr. Johnson taught and embodied because I want to be part of the joy and belonging for all that Fred embodied.

What in the world is right with this world? What in the world is right with you? Along with this man in John 9 – along with Fred – our Lord gives us sight: ‘now I see – Lord, I believe.’ Or better yet: ‘together, now we see – Lord, we believe.’ Thanks be to God. AMEN.