

I Was Blind But...

When I was a little girl, maybe four years old, I fell down the stairs at our house. My mom came on the run, scooped me up to comfort me, and asked me what happened. "The camel pushed me," I said. And then I wondered how my mom knew that wasn't what had happened. When something bad happens, especially if there's a chance we might be thought to be at fault, we look for someone to blame, whether it's the dog or the oldest brother, the night shift or even Jar Jar Binks.

That's where the disciples started when they saw the man who had been born blind. "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he should be born blind?" They were reflecting a stream of their tradition as it was written in Deuteronomy 5:9-10, saying that those who disobeyed God's commandments would be punished to the third or fourth generation. Most people assumed that someone's sin, someone's grave mistake, was at the root of a disease or disability.

Most of us wince at the thought that a congenital birth defect would be seen as the result of someone's sin, but this still happens today. The AIDs and Ebola epidemics were both blamed on the sin of the people who got them by some people. Kathy Black tells about a clergy woman with a deaf daughter was told by a "good Christian" that her daughter's deafness was God's punishment because her mother, as a woman, had become a minister, something that was against God's plan. It's easy to laugh or become enraged at those responses, but in other, more subtle, ways most of us fall into the same trap at one time or another. For many years, the clinical explanation for autism was a cold and withdrawing mother. Now that we know more about human genetics, it is often assumed that the fault is in the genes and scientists go searching for the break or the mutation in the human genome that causes all kinds of things from autism to cancer. It is human to ask "why" and try to find an

answer. But there's a thin line between explanation and blame with finger pointing, accusations and judgment.

With the blame game comes the assumption that there is something grievously wrong with the person with the disability, that they are broken or imperfect in a way beyond the way others are broken or imperfect, something that is critically wrong or lacking in the way that they are made and that someone or something has to be at fault for it.

Our language around this is particularly tricky when it comes to blindness, and we see that even in this morning's story, full as it is with language about blindness and seeing. There is literal blindness and metaphorical blindness, blindness when we can't see with our eyes that stands in for a metaphorical blindness of not seeing or understanding with our minds and our hearts. That metaphorical blindness is used by the prophets and even in our own language now as a way of talking about sinfulness that may be either willful or unknowing. It is also used as a way of talking about life before knowing Jesus. As we will sing this morning, "I was blind, but now I see." How do we keep our understanding of the metaphorical blindness of our spirits from spilling over into some kind of judgment or assumptions about people who are physically blind?

Kathy Black once asked a clergy friend of hers who was blind how she dealt with that line in "Amazing Grace". "Oh, I sing it," the woman said, "I just sing 'I'm blind but still can't see.'" What a great way of recognizing what is and accepting it without judgment!

Jesus also sidesteps the blame game. He simply refuses to play. He changes the conversation because he sees the blind man in a different way: "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be seen in him." Jesus doesn't see the disability as a punishment. He doesn't see the blind man as someone who is essentially sinful because of his blindness. He sees him as a person in whom and through whom God can be at work – a whole different ball game.

Erin Rafferty is a professor at Princeton Seminary who teaches about ministry with people with disabilities. She also has a daughter who is profoundly disabled due to an extremely rare genetic disease. Her daughter, who is about five now, is wheelchair bound, non-verbal, and has to be fed through a tube. Yet she simply who she is, not defined by her disability, but loved and treasured as a child of God. Her name is Lucia, which means light. When she laughs and smiles, she lives up to her name. In her joy, God's light is seen through her. She is so much more than the catalogue of things she can't do. She is someone in whom and through whom God is at work, as God works through each one of us, regardless of our abilities or disabilities so God's light can be seen.

Of course, the story goes on from that initial question and answer between Jesus and the disciples. The man, who hasn't even asked for help, is given his sight through a strange process that involves spit, mud and washing in the pool of Siloam. Then the rest of the story begins, as the man who now can see is met with skepticism and questions about the one who healed him from his neighbors, and more intense examination and accusations that his healer on this Sabbath day is at the very least a sinner from the Pharisees. Through it all, the man who never even saw Jesus with his eyes learns to see and understand with his mind and his heart, as he moves from someone who isn't even able to say where the one who healed him is, to attesting that he is a prophet to contesting with the Pharisees and stating clearly that Jesus is from God, to a man who falls on his knees in faith before the one who healed him. He is a man through whom God's work and God's light is seen.

It's not about the blame game, no matter how hard the pharisees around us or even we ourselves try to a place to point a finger. It's not about how things got to be this way, although that's a natural question to ask. Once you have met Jesus and your life has been changed, the question becomes "How do I bear witness to what God has done through me?" "How do I let God's light shine through me?"

For each of us, depending on our gifts and abilities, the answer will be different. Some have the ability to let God's light shine simply through a smile or a touch of the hand. Some have the ability to speak articulately about what God has done and is doing through them. Some do it by living their lives in simple witness to their faith, not talking about it much, but living it out day by day where others can see. Some do it by matching their actions to their words and reaching out and speaking out to proclaim God's mercy and God's justice and by helping others to do the same.

Many of you knew Bernice Warren. I'm sad to let you know that Bernice died on Friday morning. She died peacefully, surrounded by family, her indomitable spirit keeping her going to the end. Bernice was a girl from the streets of Chester, and like so many others, she could have stayed a girl from the streets all her life. But she heard God's call and made her way first through college, then through seminary. She served a little church in Baltimore, but then had an opportunity to come home to Chester. She spent the rest of her life at Chester Eastside, where she touched many lives and advocated tirelessly on behalf of young and old, the poor and the kicked-aside not only in Chester but also in Haiti and anyplace else where God's justice was demanded. She wasn't perfect but she was passionate. God's works were seen in her. God's light shone fiercely through her.

What about you? Instead of playing the blame game, take a look at where you are today. Give thanks for all God has given you and ask, what can I do to let God's works be known through me?