

TEXT: John 9:1-41  
THEME: God works in and through the deepest vulnerability  
SUBJECT: Healing  
TITLE: Weaponizing Suffering

Fourth Sunday in Lent  
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Messiah Moravian  
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“Who sinned?”

This is the first question the disciples ask when they see a blind man begging by the side of the road. “Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

Jesus responded, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; but rather that the works of God be made manifest in him.”

If we take this answer to refer to the affliction itself and not to the subsequent cure, then we have a “meager, baffling, and infuriating answer to one of the few questions worth asking, to wit, What in the Sam Hill is going on here?” So says Annie Dillard in *Holy the Firm*. “Do we really need more victims to remind us that we’re all victims? Do we need blind men stumbling about to remind us what God can - and will - do?”

Annie concludes we do need reminding, not of what God can do, but of what we cannot do. We cannot catch time in its free fall and stick a nickel’s worth of sense into our days. We need reminding that we are created, *creatures*, sojourners in a land we did not make. We are most deeply asleep at the switch when we fancy we control any switches at all.

Control. The need for control fuels the desire to know who sinned. Every time I hear someone say, and, Yes, I hear people say this all the time, “What did I do to deserve this?” I hear an echo of the disciples asking, “Who sinned?” We assume we could have acted differently, preventing an unwelcome outcome.

In some cases this is the case. Engaging in high risk behaviors increases the risk of suffering. Other times, perhaps most of the time, there is nothing we can or could have done to prevent suffering, our own or others’. We are, as Annie Dillard reminds us, *creatures*, subject to the consequences of many actions beyond our control.

I think Jesus’ response to the disciples is a warning against weaponizing suffering. Pastor Kevin Swanson, of Reformation Church in Elizabeth, Colorado, claimed Houston sinned by having a “very, very aggressively pro-homosexual mayor.” This is why Hurricane Harvey devastated Houston. “Jesus sends the message home, unless Americans repent, unless Houston repents, they will all likewise perish. That is the message that the Lord Jesus Christ is sending home right now to America.”

On the morning of September 11, 2001, Rowan Williams, distinguished theologian and Anglican Archbishop of Wales, was preparing to record a program on spirituality for Trinity Church, Wall Street - just two blocks from the World Trade Center. He was interrupted. Out of that experience came a little book, *Writing in the Dust*.

Near the end of this book, Williams discusses the story of the man born blind. When the disciples ask, "Who sinned?" they are inviting Jesus to impose meaning on someone's suffering within a calculus that assumes a neat relation between suffering and guilt.

Jesus declines; guilt is irrelevant, and all that can be said is that this blindness is an opportunity for God's glory to become manifest. The meaning is not in the system being operated by the disciples, but in the unknown future where healing will occur.

As the story proceeds, we see how the fact of healing becomes a problem in turn, because it does not fit into the available categories; it has been performed by an outsider, a suspected heretic. Namely, Jesus. The blind man is again faced with people, this time religious authorities, who want him to accept a meaning imposed by them and he resists.

Williams believes what matters is Jesus' initial refusal to make the blind man's condition a *proof* of anything - divine justice or injustice, human sin or innocence. We who call ourselves Christian have every reason to say no to any system at all that uses suffering to prove things: to prove the sufferer's guilt as a sinner being punished, or - perhaps more frequently in our world - to prove the sufferer's innocence as a martyr whose heroism must never be forgotten or betrayed.

Explanations of suffering do not shield us from suffering nor do they heal suffering. COVID-19 is no respecter of nationality, race, religion, political affiliation, or any competing system operated by human beings, or even, we now know, of age. I cannot feel secure because I have not "sinned." With the renunciation of all our various ways of making suffering a weapon or tool of ideology, we can turn our attention and energies to caring for one another.

The blind man in this story sees more clearly than the disciples who attempt to impose meaning upon his suffering. The blind man sees more clearly than the religious authorities who deny his healing is of God. The blind man stands in the tradition of Job who refuses to accept any meaning imposed on his experience by others, whoever they may be.

Helen Keller wrote "Eyes for Invisibles." "I have walked with people whose eyes are full of light but who see nothing in sea or sky, nothing in city streets, nothing in books. It were far better to sail forever in the night of blindness with sense, and feeling, and mind, than to be content with the mere act of seeing. The only lightless dark is the night of darkness in ignorance and insensibility."

We have a very hard time seeing realities that do not conform to our prejudices, our beliefs, our world views. Healing begins in recognizing our own blindness. Healing begins when we see not the disease but a human being just like us. Healing begins when we let go of explanations of suffering and embrace the sufferer.