

Children

Good morning, boys and girls. I brought along with me this morning a little bit of a problem. Her name is Prissy Plant and she has me in a fit. She won't get along with any of the other plants that I have in my house. Let me tell you a little bit about her.

This morning she was making all kinds of noise telling the other plants in my house how perfect she was. Prissy can never keep her mouth shut, and she has a large one. She told my one little plant over in the corner what a shrimp he was and how big and beautiful she was by comparison. That wasn't a nice thing to say. The little plant is small, but that is the way he was made, and he is growing. Yesterday she was complaining to another plant that hangs in the window that she smelled, and of course Prissy is right about that. Prissy doesn't smell at all. The other night when I was eating dinner I heard Prissy criticizing a plant that sits on the piano about his odd shape. She said that all of her leaves are perfect, each one is the right size and none of them are brown or nicked in any way. That was disgusting. Of course Prissy is perfectly made, but that is the problem. Prissy is artificial. She should be perfect.

I finally took Prissy aside this morning and told her that she was coming to church with me and I was going to teach her a lesson. Prissy thinks so much about herself that she cannot see the truth, or the beauty, in anything else. What is more than that, is that she will never grow. She is false all of the way through.

I hope that you can learn something by listening to Prissy. There are a lot of people who think they know everything, and you can't teach them even the simplest truth.

Jesus ran into people like this all of the time. They didn't believe in him because they were afraid that if they did, they would be less than what they thought they already were. They were blind to the truth, and they didn't want to know the truth. They were artificial people just like Prissy is an artificial plant. Real people listen to Jesus and learn the truth about themselves and about God. If you are going to be a real person, then you must also follow the teachings of Jesus and be a real person.

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I

Here's a story from the headlines that all of you will remember. In March 2019, the FBI announced the completion of "Operation Varsity Blues," a nationwide scam in which wealthy parents paid outrageous bribes to get their children into prestigious colleges like Yale and Stanford. Fifty people were charged in the scandal, including parents, test administrators for the ACT and SAT, and college coaches who all collaborated in getting unqualified students admitted to big-name schools.

In addition to the bribes, the folks involved in this scandal falsified test scores on the ACT and SAT exams, made up fake awards and honors on the students' college applications, paid professionals to take tests or attend classes for the students, and put the students on college athletic teams for which the students had no actual athletic experience. Some parents even photoshopped their kids' faces over the bodies of professional athletes to make it look like their kids had real athletic experience. (1)

Comedian Trevor Noah from *The Daily Show* had one of the best jokes about this scandal: "Some of these parents allegedly paid up to \$6.5 million," he said. "Which is insane. Honestly, for that amount of money, just buy a smarter kid!" (2)

It's easy to make fun of people who seem to have many privileges. Did they earn them? Do they deserve them? Are they just slackers with more money than brains? Because we obviously deserve all the blessings we have in our lives, don't we? We've worked for them. We're good people, and that earns us some good karma, right?

Former Texas governor Anne Richards once remarked about President George Bush Sr., "He was born on third base and thought he hit a triple." (3)

We really hold tight to this idea of being a self-made man or woman. We get angry if people suggest that we benefit from some unearned privilege. But we do.

Let's change the conversation for a minute. What do you think would be the most difficult aspect of being born blind? What would you miss out on? What would you need help with? How do you think other people would treat you?

I want you to think about that as we read again the opening words to today's Bible passage: "As (Jesus) went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?'"

There it is again. This issue of earning our privileges, deserving our blessings, has been around a long time. The underlying belief here is that all of life should be just and happy and under our control, so injustice and suffering must have a root cause. We must deserve it in some way. Because if the blind man didn't deserve his disability, then we don't deserve our ability. We don't deserve our blessings and comfort and safety and health and happiness if he didn't deserve his blindness. And if none of us deserves our lot in life, then none of us can boast or complain if our lot in life changes. Whether we win or lose, we don't deserve either state.

Nancy Eiesland, Associate Professor of Sociology of Religion at Emory University has written: "Growing up with a disability, I could not accept the traditional interpretations of disability that I heard in prayers, in Sunday school, and in sermons. 'You are special in God's eyes,' I was often told, 'that's why you were given this painful disability.' Or, 'Don't worry about your suffering now—in heaven you will be made whole.' This confused me. My disability had taught me who I am and who God is. What would it mean to be without this knowledge?"

"My family frequented faith healers with me in tow. I was never healed. People asked about my hidden sins, but they must have been so well hidden that even I misplaced them. The theology that I heard was inadequate to my experience." (4). Look at the Book of Job. His friends give him too all the traditional answers and we already know that known of them are true.

Sometimes our ideas about what makes life worthwhile, about what we "deserve," about what constitutes a blessing from God, stand in the way of us understanding God and living a life of meaning and purpose.

Usually, when someone comes to Jesus with a question, Jesus answers with another question, or with a parable or a challenge. In fact, author Philip Yancey says he once heard a theologian say that Jesus was asked 183 questions in the Bible, and he only answered three of them directly. Three out of one-hundred-eighty-three. (5)

So sit up and pay attention. This is one of the most important questions of human existence. And it's one of the few instances when Jesus answers a question directly. Why was this man blind? "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him . . ."

After saying this, he spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man's eyes. "Go," he told him, "wash in the Pool of Siloam." So the man went and washed, and came home seeing.

Notice that there are two acts of healing in these four verses. There is, of course, the physical healing. What a great joy and blessing this man received because he stepped out in faith. He received his sight!

But I think the first act of healing occurred when the blind man heard Jesus say, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.” Jesus’ statement gave the man hope and healed his sense that his disability was somehow a curse that made him a lesser man. And this hope is evidenced by the fact that the blind man got up and went to the pool of Siloam to wash the mud off his eyes. Have you ever tried walking across your bedroom in the dark? Most of us are reluctant to do that. So can you imagine how far that man had to walk in the hopes that this stranger wasn’t lying to him, wasn’t tricking him, but actually had the power to heal him? We don’t know for sure where the blind man was when Jesus healed him. But one commentary writer says, “A trip to Siloam and back from the nearest wall of the temple, for example, would be about 1,300 yards.” (6)

Would you walk blind even half that distance on the word of a stranger? Jesus’ words gave this man so much hope that he was willing to take that risk.

A well-known professor in the field of management has said something profound about suffering: “There’s some pain that needs a solution, and some pain that needs a story.” (7) In this moment, Jesus gave the blind man both a solution—physical healing—and a story—that he was not disabled by some sin that either his parents or he had committed. I want us to focus on that fact today because most of us know what it is to carry around certain pains in life for which there is no solution. An unanswered prayer. An undeserved burden. We beg God for a solution. What if God gives us a story instead?

I think the first part of this story would be that God can use every part of your life for His glory. Many of us settle for a wimpy calling. We are content if we are just good people who go to church and help our neighbor occasionally. We are not a shining example of the love, the strength, the power and the grace of Almighty God. Part of the reason for that is because we hide our suffering and questions and pains from each other. We think that our weakness makes us less of a witness for Christ. Instead, it’s walking in faith through our pain that causes others to see God’s glory in our lives. Let me give you an example of a woman who discovered God in her weakness.

Sheila Walsh is a best-selling author, Christian singer and former co-host of *The 700 Club*. She struggled with depression for years but tried to deny it. She had spent her adult life in a very public ministry role. She couldn’t dare let down her guard and admit how hopeless and sad and burned out she was. One day, a guest on *The 700 Club* said, “Sheila, you ask us every day how we’re all doing, but how are you doing?” And this question broke through Sheila’s carefully curated image. She began to cry uncontrollably, right there on air. By that evening, she had checked herself into a psychiatric hospital. She gave up her co-hosting job. She took a step back from her ministries. And she admitted that she didn’t know who she was anymore.

Today, Sheila Walsh is back in ministry, speaking and writing and sharing her struggles with depression. Instead of being rejected or put to shame for her condition, she discovered thousands of women who struggled with the same issue and needed to know they weren't alone. God did not miraculously heal her of her depression; instead, God has used her depression to draw her into a deeper relationship of trust with Him and increase her ministry to hurting people. As Walsh says, "The Good News will never be good news until you know that God knows all of your bad news." (8)

And not only does God know all your bad news. God can use all your bad news. God is most glorified in the way we handle our suffering. Our blessings don't draw people to God. No one is in awe of a healthy, smart, wealthy person who achieves great things. We are in awe of those who overcome hard times, who choose joy in the face of sorrow, who choose love in the face of betrayal or hatred.

So every blessing and every hardship, every strength and every disability, every joy and every sorrow in our lives is an opportunity for God to work out His plan through us. Does that mean that God plans everything that happens to us? No, I don't believe so. There is suffering that comes from the sins of others, like abuse or neglect or divorce. There is suffering that comes from impersonal forces outside our control, like dividing cancer cells or drought or recession. God did not intend for us to endure this suffering. He does intend to work through this suffering to strengthen us and make us better able to demonstrate His glory in all circumstances. People need to see the character and power of God in how you handle your suffering.

The second part of our story is that you don't have to understand everything about God; just share what you do know about Him. When the formerly blind man is questioned by his neighbors about his healing, he says, "The man they call Jesus made some mud and put it on my eyes." A few verses later, the Pharisees interrogate the man harshly. But this man turns his hard time into an opportunity to share the truth of Jesus. He still doesn't know who Jesus is or why Jesus healed him. He thinks Jesus might be a prophet. He didn't let what he didn't know prevent him from sharing what he did know. It doesn't stop him from speaking truth to power.

There are some wonderful lyrics to a song titled "My Story" by Big Daddy Weave. The song begins, "If I told you my story You would hear Hope that wouldn't let go . . . And if I told you my story You would hear Love that never gave up . . . And if I told you my story You would hear Life, but it wasn't mine . . . If I should speak then let it be Of the grace that is greater than all my sin . . . Of when justice was served and where mercy wins . . . Of the kindness of Jesus that draws me in Oh to tell you my story is to tell of Him." (9)

The formerly blind man's story is a story of hope and love and life and grace. It's the story of what Jesus did in him. And he refused to be silenced by the fear tactics of the Pharisees. The next time they interrogated him, they accused Jesus of being a sinner. And the formerly blind man said, "Whether he is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!"

And the final part of our story is that we never know who needs to hear God's story through us. There is a beautiful story on the *Divine Opportunities* blog by a man named Larry. Many years ago, Larry was driving down Highway 240 in Memphis when he saw a car pulled off on the side of the highway. He felt strongly that God was leading him to stop and help. He pulled up behind the stopped car and saw a young woman standing by the side of the road, staring off into space. When he asked if she needed help, she began to cry. This young mother had just come from St. Jude Children's Hospital where her two-year-old son was undergoing treatments for leukemia. Her husband had walked out on the family not long after their child's diagnosis. And this flat tire on the side of Highway 240 in Memphis felt like the final straw for this young woman. She felt so lost and alone.

Larry didn't have a solution for this woman. But he did have a story. He knew now why he had felt the urge to stop. Eight and a half years earlier, when Larry's little son was just two years old, Larry's wife had died of leukemia. He knew what it was to be grief-stricken and confused. He knew what it was to be a single parent. He knew what it was to feel alone and helpless and desperate. And he knew what it was to rely on God for his strength. And so Larry began sharing the story of how God worked through his grief and anger and loneliness. He shared how God had helped him to be a single parent to his little son. As Larry wrote on the blog, "It was a God thing. I don't recall a lot of what I said—it's like it came in and went out, a lot like a gift of the Spirit. It's not necessarily something I thought about and said. It just flowed."

Larry sat with the woman while she cried. Then he changed her tire and prayed with her. And when Larry drove away that day, he understood in a new way how God had used his pain to bring comfort and strength to someone else in need. (10)

As the professor said, "There's some pain that needs a solution, and some pain that needs a story." You may never get an answer to your "Why?" So change the question to "How can God use this?" We ask God for a reason; God gives us a purpose.

In this lifetime, you may never get a solution to your pain. You may never experience healing. You may never see how God is using it. But if you give your pain to God, you can have a new story. It will be the story of how God is glorified in our weakness, not in our strength. God is glorified in our perseverance more than our power. God is glorified more by our attitudes than by our achievements. And God is using our pain to grow us into people who reflect His glory and draw others to Him.

We ask God for a solution; God gives us a story instead. Someone needs to hear the story of God in your life. How can you share it? Not just the shiny, happy parts. God is glorified in the tough parts. The good news is that God can use your bad news to share the good news. Will you let Him?

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10. <http://divineopportunity.com/stories-larry>.

Based upon a sermon by King Duncan

## II

Don’t touch your face! We’ve been hearing this for the past two weeks; the more they say it, the harder it is not to touch our faces. It’s just instinctual, whether scratching, pushing hair from our eyes, or grabbing a tissue. This caution makes us realize that our face is actually a set of carefully arranged openings, between our mouths, noses and even our eyes; it’s a major way things get into our bodies.

So how do we feel with this phrase in the Gospel, that Jesus “made clay from dirt and his own spit,” and he then put that on the blind man’s eyes? It isn’t even clear that the man asked Jesus to do this. Rather, the man seems to be used principally as a passive example of what can happen—his parents must have sinned, so that’s why he was born blind.

Last week we had the water of the well; this week, we have a different kind of water—the spittle that Jesus uses to make the clay he'll put on the eyes of this blind man. The word "clay" reminds us of another Biblical image, when God makes clay and shapes it into the form of Adam, the first human. Jesus is doing something analogous to what his Father does when he creates: he is bringing into being something that wasn't there before.

Yes, the man is born blind. That's how we know this is an act of creation. Jesus is not restoring something the man had and then lost; he is bringing into that man's world something that he never had before and, I'm sure, something that he thought he would never have. We can imagine how he lived, how dependent he was on others, especially his parents, and how small his world had to be.

When Jesus puts the mud on this man's eyes, he is asking him: do you want new life? Do you want my life penetrating you? Do you want to see with my eyes? Can I touch you in a way that will leave you changed forever?

The blind man washes in the pool called "Sent." This completes the imagery for us: the pool indeed is the water of baptism, the sacrament by which Christ's life penetrates our own lives, the sacrament in which we become children of God and sisters and brothers of Jesus. Do we want to see like Jesus? Or look upon others as Jesus did? Or speak like Jesus, or care like Jesus, or give ourselves like Jesus? Do we want Jesus to penetrate us?

At this time of year, we are powerfully mindful of those who are preparing to enter the Church, for whom Baptism and Holy Communion will not be memories or weekly actions but powerful, new experiences of encountering Jesus. Yet what happened and happens to us is not anything less than what will happen to them: our conversions, our discipleship, our following of Jesus is confirmed at every Mass we celebrate.

The man born blind begins as somewhat of a passive figure; people talk about him and he has to listen. But after Jesus touches him, he finds himself and his voice. When they try to shut him down, he affirms in their faces: "The only thing I know is this: I was blind but now I can see." Can we remain ourselves passive and quiet in the face of what Christ does for us every day? Has not Christ given us a vision, and also a voice with which to speak it out?

A sermon by Fr Desiano

### III

You have to wonder what kind of God some people have!

Kathryn Lindskoog has suffered for two decades with multiple sclerosis (MS), a chronic disease that gradually weakens and paralyzes the body. She has been amazed at some of the advice she has received from friends and relatives. A few typical examples:

"You must really like to be sick; you bring so much of it on yourself." That comment was from a nearby relative who never so much as sent a get-well card.

"The reason I have perfect health is that I think right; nobody gets sick unless he thinks wrong." That from another relative.



"I know just how you feel about being crippled; I had a bad case of tennis elbow last month."

"Your present improvement is just wishful thinking." How's that for encouragement?

"I know you fake your limp to try to get attention." That comment was from her pastor. He was entirely serious.

And this last one: "God must cherish you to trust you with this burden." (1) That hurts. What kind of God do some people have?

A country preacher was visiting his parishioners after a local flood. He called on a farmer whose crop had washed away and whose cows had all drowned. "Whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth," quoted the preacher, trying to offer some comfort. The farmer looked at him and said drily, "Well, I believe he overdid it this time." The farmer was right. What kind of God do some people have?

Many people were startled to hear TV evangelists Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell blame the bombing of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on God's unhappiness with gays, feminists and People for the American Way. Did these two influential clergymen really mean that God killed thousands of innocent people because God was unhappy with the lifestyles of other people in our land? Is God the ultimate terrorist? What kind of God do some people have?

Jesus and his disciples passed a man blind from birth. "Who sinned," asked Jesus' disciples, "this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" What kind of God did these disciples have? Did they think that God looks down from heaven and says, "All right fellow. I know that you've been cheating on your taxes and cheating on your wife and I am going to take that precious little baby in your wife's womb and I'm going to strike it blind to punish you? That'll show you. Zap!" Sound far-fetched? There is someone in this very sanctuary who has experienced a similar tragedy. And you have carried around a burden of guilt. Deep down you have a feeling that God is punishing you for something you have done by hurting someone you love. What kind of God is that?

Of course, there is a smattering of that kind of theology in the Old Testament. If you ever have any question, however, about your sin being visited on someone you love, I refer you to Jeremiah 31: 29-30. Jeremiah is speaking of the coming Kingdom--the Kingdom that will come with the arrival of the Messiah, whom we know as Jesus the Christ. Jeremiah writes: "In those days they shall no longer say: "'The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge. But every one shall die for his own sin; each man who eats sour grapes, his teeth shall be set on edge.'" (RSV) Mark this down. Inscribe it upon your heart: God does not punish children for the sins of their parents.

Sometimes children do suffer because of their parents. Someone here this morning may have had an abusive parent. You bear emotional scars from that experience. Television brings into our homes the horror of babies addicted to cocaine because their mothers were addicted as they carried them in their womb. That happens. Those are not acts of God, however, but of people.

There are two sources of suffering in this world. One source is sin. We break God's laws or nature's laws and we suffer. That is built into the very fabric of life. I walk out of this sanctuary and step in front of a speeding car. Do I lie there in the middle of the street and ask, "Why, dear Lord, did this happen to me?" Of course not. I know why it happened. I broke a law. When we break laws, we pay.

We pay when other people break laws. Not only terrorists, but such people as drunk drivers bring much unnecessary suffering into people's lives.

We make jokes about sin. One fellow said he thought that the doctrine of Original Sin meant that he had to think up a new one every time. We joke about sin, but most of the suffering that takes place in this world is caused by our disobedience of God's laws. The other source of suffering is the natural order. The East Coast usually has several hurricanes each year. Is there anyone in this room who really believes that God sends hurricanes to devastate parts of our country to punish the folks in that area for their sins? How about earthquakes in the other end of our land? If God sends natural disasters as punishment, then why didn't these disasters destroy the casinos in Atlantic City and Las Vegas? Or the crack houses in Washington, D.C.? Or the porno stores that are a blight on many cities? For that matter, why didn't they destroy your house or mine, for we are also sinners?

We live in the most beautiful, the most majestic, the most glorious world imaginable, but it is a world where there are hurricanes and earthquakes and viruses and cholesterol and defective genes. None of these are sent by God to punish us. "He makes His sun rise on the evil and the good," said Jesus, "and sends rain on the just and the unjust" (Matthew 5:45). The natural order contains both good and evil. Why did God place us in such a world? The writer of Genesis says that it was because of Adam's sin. Man not only became alienated from God after Adam sinned but even from the very earth which is his home. That is one explanation. Another is that this world is but a laboratory, a preparatory school, if you will. God is in the business of creating souls fit to dwell with him in eternity. So he has given us obstacles to overcome. Why? That is the only way we grow.

John Steele Gordon in an issue of American Heritage magazine makes an interesting observation. He notes that in the story, Silver Blaze, the clue that most interested Sherlock Holmes was the dog that didn't bark in the night. Why didn't it bark? Gordon goes on to say that in reading the latest Forbes list of the four hundred richest Americans, he was most impressed by the names that weren't there--names like Astor, Carnegie, Frick, Gould, Harriman, Morgan and Vanderbilt. At the turn of this century, these names personified American wealth beyond counting. Today those names are to be found on street signs, universities, parks, hospitals, museums, concert halls and libraries. But not on the Forbes list of the four hundred wealthiest Americans. Why not? Think of the head start the descendants of these men had on the rest of us. Could it be that when wealth comes too easily it has a way of diminishing creativity, desire, perseverance? So it is when life comes too easily. We grow through struggle.

Of course, all of us would prefer an easier way. One writer recently described his dad's error in editing out commercials with a newly-bought VCR. The intent was to tape White Christmas and remove all commercials with the pause button on the remote control. However, his dad got out of sync and ended up taping the commercials and editing out White Christmas. The writer goes on to note his dad's mistake is not terribly different from what many of us end up doing with real life. We want the quick fix, something to make all of life's moments string together as fun and excitement without any of the problems. Then we discover that quick fixes do not work. Life simply is not designed so we can edit out all the trials and hardships.

As J. Willard Marriott has put it,

"Good timber does not grow with ease:  
the stronger the wind, the stronger the trees."

We learn, we grow, we mature as we deal with life's many hardships.

There are two sources of suffering--sin and the natural order. There is but one source of healing--God. Jesus said to his disciples, "It was not this man who sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God may be made manifest in him." All healing comes from God. God is a God of health and wholeness. Healing is God's will for our lives--whether our need is physical or emotional. God wants us well. God has planted healing in the very world He has created.

A generation ago diseases ravaged this planet that we don't even think of any more. As the growth of medical technology and knowledge continues to accelerate, there will be even more progress in the generations to come. We don't create cures. We but discover what God has already ordained.

A medical team has been working in the Amazon jungle under a contract from the National Cancer Institute to find the next generation of anti-cancer drugs. Michael Balick, an ethnobiologist, says, "The rain forest is a veritable chemical factory." For example, an extract from the rosy periwinkle has been found to reduce white blood cell counts, actually bringing about remissions in 85% of childhood leukemia cases. We know that penicillin comes from a mold, but did you know that cortisone is derived from yams? Atropine, a drug for stomach ulcers, comes from belladonna plants. The world is filled with God's healing properties. (3)

God has built healing into our very being and into the world that God has created. More importantly, God himself is the source of healing. Jesus could heal the blind because of who he was. To be in the presence of God is to be in the presence of healing. His will is for us to be healed. Even though the brokenness of this world may take its toll on us, it does not change God's eternal purpose. God's will is for the healing of our society. God's will is for the healing of the world. God's will is for your healing and mine. Even death is a form of healing since it brings us into the eternal presence of God. When you hear about innocent persons suffering in a great calamity, do not ask why God brought this tragedy about. God is a God of love, compassion and infinite patience. And God's desire is for God's children's good.

The Hoover Dam, built in 1935 on the Colorado River, is an engineering wonder.

Hoover is what is called an arch-gravity dam. It is designed so the greater the pressure applied to the dam, the more it is wedged into the solid rock. The greater the forces against the dam, the stronger it becomes. So let it be with us. When heartaches come, as they will, let us not cry out, "Why has this happened to me? Why has this happened to someone I love? What have I done to deserve this?" Rather, let's surrender our need to a healing God. Let's allow our hurt to wedge us ever more surely into the solid rock.