I

Children

**Object:**A piece of wax, a piece of clay, and a bottle of water.

Boys and girls, I have here a piece of wax, a piece of clay, and a bottle of water. Suppose I were to build a fire here in the front of the chancel and were to put the wax on that fire, what would happen to it? That's right. it would melt. Suppose I put this clay on the fire. Do you know what would happen to it? That's right. The clay would harden. Isn't that interesting--one would melt and the other would get harder? Suppose I put this bottle of water in a pot and put it over the fire, what would happen? That's right, it would start to boil and soon it would disappear as steam.

Now let's think about that for a moment. Suppose somebody hurts you. How would you react? Some of you might cry. Some of you might get very angry. Some of you would never speak to that person again. Others will have forgotten it within an hour. The same hurt, but like the wax, the clay and the water, we would each react differently. A wise man once said that it is not what happens to us on the outside that matters, but what we have on the inside.

What we want to have on the inside is the Spirit of Jesus--to have him live in our hearts. Then when disappointment comes or hurt, he can help us react in a way that's best for us and for others.

Adult

Have you ever noticed how many questions you ask each day? We are constantly learning from our environment, and asking questions is a big part of that. It’s the best way to learn. Usually. But you have to ask the right questions too. Not every question leads to greater knowledge. Some questions lead to greater frustration.

A few years ago, when the internet was fairly new, a woman named Nancy wanted to teach her elderly mother how to use it. So she introduced her to the website “Ask Jeeves.” Before Google, “Ask Jeeves” was an early web browser and question-and-answer site. Nancy explained that she could type in any question her mother asked, and the website would answer it.

So Nancy’s mother asked, “How is Aunt Helen feeling?” (1)

So maybe Nancy should have explained the internet a little better. Maybe the internet can’t answer every question.

It reminds me of a story that comedian David Brenner told. He had just boarded a crowded subway car, and the only seat he could find had a stain on it. Brenner spread his newspaper on the seat and sat down.

A man sitting nearby asked, “Are you reading that newspaper?”

Brenner answered, “Yes,” then stood up, turned the page, and sat down on the newspaper again. (2)

Not every question leads to greater knowledge. Some questions just lead to frustration. Back in May, 2021, there was an amazing story of a man who hijacked an elementary school bus in South Carolina and took the bus driver, a bus monitor, and 18 school children hostage. This sounds like a frightening, even tragic, story. But I call it an amazing story because the kidnapper gave up and released all the hostages after just six minutes. What caused him to give up on his crime? He got tired of the children asking him questions.

In an interview, the bus driver, Kenneth Corbin, said that as soon as the man got on the bus, the frightened children began asking him questions. First, the students asked him if he was a soldier. The man said, “Yes.”

Corbin said, “They asked him, ‘Why are you doing this?’ He never did have an answer for this one. They asked, was he going to hurt them? He said ‘No.’ They asked, ‘Are you going to hurt our bus driver?’ He said, ‘No. I’m going to put you off the bus.’”

Corbin recalled. “He sensed more questions coming and I guess something clicked in his mind and he said, ‘Enough is enough already,’ and he told me to ‘Stop the bus, and just get off.’”

It was at this point that the hijacker herded the adults and children off the bus. They were all unharmed. He took off with the bus but was later arrested. (3)

Isn’t that amazing? An armed man attempting to hijack a school bus was so frustrated by the children’s questions that he set his hostages free after just six minutes. Some of you who are parents of small children understand this completely.

I thought about the importance of asking the right questions as I read our Bible story for today. There are 42 verses in the story of Jesus healing the blind man. And in those 42 verses, there are 15 questions. Our passage opens with an ignorant question and ends with a life-changing question. In between those two questions, a bunch of people have to confront what they believe about God. And if we’re listening closely, we might do the same.

Today marks the fourth Sunday in the season of Lent, Laetare Sunday which means Rejoice because the antiphon opens with it and that is why I am wearing rose, It is a period of 40 days set aside specifically for Christians to reflect on the events leading up to the death of Jesus. For the month of March, we are studying four people and their encounters with Jesus. Each person came to him with a different question. Each person came to him with a different need. To each person, Jesus revealed some part of his mission as the Messiah, the Savior of the world. And each person walked away with a second chance at life, a chance to live a new life because they had met God face-to-face. I pray that in this season leading up to Easter every single person here will also get a second chance at a new life.

Our Bible story opens with Jesus and his disciples having just left the temple in Jerusalem. We read in vs. 1-2, “As he 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?’”

It sounds like an ignorant and insensitive question to us, but it really wasn’t. In their time and culture and religious teachings, they equated God’s blessings with health, wealth and security. We do the same thing today, don’t we? But in doing so, they reduced this man to a condition, blindness. They reduced him to a consequence, punishment for sin. And in this very question, the disciples have reduced God also. They have made the Almighty God into a divine bug zapper whose primary purpose is to zap the unrighteous any time they break the rules. **What the disciples were really asking here was, “What separates people from God?”**That’s the first thing I learn from this story. The disciples sincerely wanted to know what separates people from God.

And I think about the blind man here, the object of their unwanted attention. Don’t you think he asked that question hundreds of times throughout his life? He is never even mentioned by name in our Bible story. Others only refer to him as a blind man, a beggar. In this community, that was his whole identity. And it marked him as being separated from God. He spent his life begging for mercy from humans. Did he dare expect any mercy from God? I would guess he spent his whole life asking, “Why do I have to suffer? Why did God let this happen to me?”

There is a story from my former grief group about a woman named Mary, who has had a hard life. No easy path for her. One Sunday morning, Mary found her son Robert shot dead in her neighbor’s yard. Evidently, Robert had been caught in the crossfire of a gunfight between rival gangs. In trying to understand why Mary’s son, Robert, died this violent and senseless death, My response could be “I mean, of course I can explain it in terms of some cause-and-effect reasoning. Like, he died because he was hanging out with the wrong crowd. But that line never satisfies; it always begs more questions.

“We can start asking why are there gangs in the first place? And if we follow the trail, we might find crack cocaine and ask why it had to hit (our city) so hard. But there are always more questions to ask, more paths to follow, endless paths that lead everywhere only to turn back on us and shatter us by confronting us with our own limitations.

“As much as we try, we can’t think our way back to a starting point that explains why our story, or Mary’s story, had to lead to this point of pain and evil.” (4)

The disciples were trying to think their way back to a starting point that explains why the blind man’s story had to lead to this point of pain. They blamed it on the presence of sin; Jesus wanted them to understand the nature of God. **The disciples were asking, “What separates us from God?” The question they should have been asking is, “What restores us to God?” In his life, death and resurrection, Jesus came to show us what restores us to God.**That’s the second thing we learn from this Bible story. The question they, and we, should be asking is, “What restores us to God?”

Pay close attention here. Martin Copenhaver, in his book Jesus is the Question, notes that Jesus asked 307 questions in the four Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. But he himself only answered three questions directly. (5) This is one of those three. And it’s not at all what his disciples expected.

Jesus said, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.” And then, using his own saliva and dirt from the ground, Jesus applied mud to the blind man’s eyes and told him to go to the Pool of Siloam and wash away the mud. And verse 7 reads, “So the man went and washed, and came home seeing.”

Jesus just used this man’s greatest weakness, the source of his suffering and wounded identity, to demonstrate the liberating, restoring mission of the Messiah. But the witnesses to this miracle now proved to be the blind ones in this story. They weren’t ready to believe in Jesus as the Messiah, so they refused to see the truth.

 Neighbors who passed by this man every day in the marketplace now questioned whether he was the blind beggar or not. His own parents refused to support him for fear of being kicked out of the synagogue. The religious leaders questioned this man twice. The healed man couldn’t answer all their questions. But he didn’t let that stop him from sharing his story. He said, “One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!” The religious leaders became so angry at his insistence that Jesus was from God that they kicked him out of the synagogue.

There was a story posted on the Benedictine Sisters online blog a few years ago about a woman named Janice. When Janice decided to become a nun, her mother questioned the change in her lifestyle and personality. Janice explained how following Jesus had changed her into a new person, how she had given up the partying, drinking and drugs that had once dominated her life.

When she was done telling her story, Janice’s mother looked at her coldly and said, “I wish you were like you used to be.” (6)

We are all in danger of spiritual blindness. Do we want to see the work of God? Do we want to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Anointed One, who has come to restore us to God? Because this truth will transform your life. It will separate you from your old life and from the people around you. The rest of your life will be a journey of growing into the character of Jesus Christ.

**And that bring us to our final question, the question that starts us on our journey of restoration to God.** Jesus hears that the healed man has been kicked out of the synagogue, so he goes to find him. This man has not yet seen Jesus face-to-face. He has no idea who he is. But when Jesus sees him, he asks the healed man one simple question: “Do you believe in the Son of Man?”

Remember how I said this story began with an ignorant question and ended with a life-changing one? Here it is: **“Do you believe in the Son of Man?”** Do you believe God entered into our world in order to heal our hurts, heal our separation, and restore us to Himself?

The man asked, “Who is he, sir? Tell me so that I may believe in him.”

 Jesus said, “You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you.”

 Then the man said, “Lord, I believe,” and he worshiped him.

This man had gone from blind, begging, dependent on the mercy of others, to seeing, believing, and worshiping the Lord. Jesus had used his greatness weakness, his greatest wound, to show him the liberating, restoring mission of the Messiah. And he was forever changed.

In the 1950s, Lauren Chapin was famous for playing the role of Kathy Anderson, the adorable young daughter on the TV show “Father Knows Best.” Chapin won the part when she was just eight years old. In spite of giving up her childhood for 16-hour workdays, Lauren loved working on the show. She found comfort in the wholesome Anderson family that was portrayed in the series.

Her real home life was anything but wholesome. Chapin’s mother suffered from an addiction to alcohol, and her father was abusive. In 1962 when the show ended, Chapin had trouble finding work. Work had always been her comfort to protect her from her abusive home life. Now she turned to alcohol and drugs to numb her pain. She married and divorced two husbands. She spent time in prison and in mental institutions, attempted suicide, and contracted viral encephalitis and hepatitis. A counselor in her drug rehab program shared with her about the love of God in Jesus Christ. Although Chapin visited a few churches, she says, “I believed that God didn’t want me in His house.”

But in March, 1979, at a church in Los Angeles, Lauren Chapin answered that question, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” That day she asked Jesus to be her Lord and Savior. She says of that moment, “It was amazing. It was wonderful. My life changed dramatically.” In the years since, she has shared her faith at churches across the country and written a book about her new life titled, Father Does Know Best, and she has raised money for victims of child abuse.  The woman who once thought she was unworthy of being in God’s presence now says, “I’m an encourager. I have a ministry of compassion. God totally gave me a new life.” (7)

We all have questions about God. Some questions draw us closer to Him. Some drive us further away. In this season of Lent, I hope you examine your questions. I also hope you lay those questions alongside the life of Jesus Christ. Jesus was sent, not to answer all our questions, but to reveal to us the heart and purposes of God. Can you trust the God you see in him? If so, I pray that you will ask Jesus to be your Lord and Savior today, and let him give you a new life.

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by King Duncan & Angela Akers

II

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.

Adult

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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8. “How Depression Brought Sheila Walsh Closer to God” by Brooke Obie Guideposts Feb. 26, 2015, https://www.guideposts.org/better-living/health-andwellness/coping-with-illness/how-depression-brought-sheila-walsh-closer-to. Also excerpted from “A Prison to Set You Free: Sheila Walsh’s Journey Through Depression” Jesus Calling,https://www.jesuscalling.com/blog/sheila-walsh/.

9. “My Story” written by Michael Weaver and Justin Ingram, performed by Big Daddy Weave. 10. <http://divineopportunity.com/stories-larry>.

Based upon a sermon by King Duncan

III

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 his 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

IV

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 everyone 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.