

Blind Assumptions

Hespeler, March 19, 2023 © Scott McAndless – Fourth Sunday in Lent

1 Samuel 16:1-13, Psalm 23, Ephesians 5:8-14, [John 9:1-41](#)

The question that is asked at the beginning of our reading this morning from the Gospel of John is, in many ways, the oldest and most fundamental question of humankind.

Jesus and his disciples are walking along one day when the disciples notice a man by the side of the road. He is begging because he is blind and has been from birth. And so the disciples ask what, to them, seems to be a natural question: **“Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”**

Full of Assumptions

And that is a question that is simply overflowing with unspoken assumptions. And these are not just assumptions about the man himself or about his family. These are assumptions about the moral and ethical nature of the universe itself.

The question just takes it for granted that, if anyone is faced with adversity, whether it be a disability or an illness or some other misfortune, that it must be somebody's fault. Somebody has to be to blame, probably the person themselves or someone close to them.

They are Oblivious

But the really amazing thing is that the disciples seem to be totally oblivious to the fact that they are making an assumption. They are unaware. You might even say that they are blind to their assumption. They simply ask Jesus a question assuming that he's going to give one of two answers – either the man himself or his parents.

It never even seems to occur to them for a moment that there could possibly be an answer outside of those two possibilities. That is how deeply ingrained the assumption is; they don't even know that they're making it.

But I honestly don't think that we should be too hard on the disciples for making this assumption. They are not the only ones. Later on in the story, the Pharisees, who are perhaps the most important religious leaders in the local community, make it pretty clear that they are also labouring under the same unconscious assumption. When they are trying to argue with the now former blind man and he actually demonstrates that he is not ignorant and can hold his own in the argument, he makes them look bad. They finally end up shouting in frustration, **“You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?”**

When these Assumptions Come out

It is at those very moments when we are really frustrated at our own unexamined shortcomings, that our deepest underlying beliefs and assumptions come out. So it is made clear that the Pharisees have been assuming all along, just like the disciples were, that this guy (or at least his parents) must have done something to make him deserve it.

So, the disciples make the unconscious assumption, the religious leaders make the unconscious assumption, but these



Blind Assumptions

are not the only ones. For this is an assumption that runs right through society until this very day. Oh, we often don't say it. In fact, it has become rather rude to say it out loud, but that doesn't seem to stop us from making the assumption all the time. If someone has suffered some tragedy or misfortune, we all pretty much assume the same thing. It must be their own fault.

All the Time

It happens all the time to victims of various crimes. You hear a story of someone who has been raped, for example, what are the questions that automatically come to mind? What were they doing there at that place at that time? If she was a woman, what was she wearing? What had she been drinking? What kind of lifestyle had she been living previously? These are all questions that come to mind automatically.

They are also the kind of questions that will be asked of that woman if charges are laid, and she is forced to testify in court. It is almost never said in so many words, but the underlying assumption behind all of those questions is that she must have done something to deserve this terrible thing that happened to her.

The Assumption Behind our Prejudice

It is also the fundamental assumption that lies behind so much racism and other forms of prejudice. When you see some racial group within society that seems to suffer from various problems whether it be endemic poverty, addiction or violence, the default assumption that we tend to fall back on is not that this has been caused by some sort of structural imbalance in society or past history of oppression that is affecting present generations.

No, it is always easier to fall into the assumption that there must be some sort of ethical failure within the community itself – that they don't want to work hard or that they don't have good families or whatever it might be. There must be some reason why and it must be their own fault. That is the assumption of the racist and I suspect it is an assumption that every one of us, no matter what our racial background might be, can fall into far too easily.

And, yes, even when we are dealing with people who are suffering from illness or disability, we may make this assumption without even being aware of it. I mean, of course we don't want to think that it's somebody's own fault if they are sick or if they lost their sight or anything like that, but if we can find some sort of cause behind the problem that can somehow be traced back to something that they did, it's like we relax. It's like the world suddenly makes sense again.

Why we do it

And I think I know why we do this. We do this because the world is a very scary place. It is a place where bad things often happen for no particular reason – at least not for any reason that we can understand. And when the world doesn't make sense, which it often doesn't, we will grasp for any reason that we can find in order to force it to make sense.

And often the easiest reason that we can find is to blame the victims themselves for what it is that they are suffering from. They must have sinned in some way. It must be their own fault. It's a terrible thought; of course it is. It's just that at least it seems better than the alternative which is to give in and admit that we live in a universe where something really bad could happen to me or to somebody that I love for no reason at all.

And if I can just take it for granted that that man was born blind because somebody sinned, I can feel safe because I don't think I have sinned in anyway that might make me deserving of such a fate.

Jesus Doesn't Share it

So, the blind assumption is very common. But what is particularly notable in this story is that Jesus doesn't share that assumption. In fact, he takes the assumption and rejects the entire premise behind it. "**Neither this man nor his parents sinned,**" Jesus replies. He forces his disciples to consider that there might just be something going on in this situation outside of their easy and comfortable assumptions. And with just those few words, Jesus tears apart most of our assumptions about the moral universe.

What if everything that is bad that happens doesn't have to be somebody's fault. What if it is actually not at all helpful to waste our energy finding someone to blame or to shame for everything that has gone wrong. In fact, what if our whole approach of finding a reason for why a bad thing happened is completely wrongheaded?

A New Way of Thinking about it

That is exactly where Jesus redirects the disciples' thoughts. Jesus says, "**He was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.**" And I want to be clear on what Jesus is saying here. He is not proposing an alternate reason for why the bad thing has happened to this man.

I know it's sometimes taken that way, but Jesus is not saying that it was God's will that this man be born blind so that Jesus might do an amazing thing by healing him. He is not talking about cause and effect; he is talking about effect and opportunity.

God does not will for anybody to have horrible things happen to them. I believe that such things sadden the heart of God even more than they sadden our hearts.

Where we Need to Spend our Energy

No, instead Jesus is challenging them and all of us to look at such tragedies from a different point of view. As much as we would like to, we may never know why some things happen – not in this life anyways. And that is why we cannot consume ourselves in searching for scapegoats and people to blame.

But, Jesus is saying, in every problem, every tragedy, there is an opportunity for action. There is a possibility of revealing God's works in this world for good. He is asking us to focus on that possibility instead of focussing on the question of who we can blame.

The Result: Enlightenment

And, of course, the whole remainder of this story is all about what happens when we make that shift. The result is, quite literally, enlightenment. The result is not only that the blind man is made able to see, but also that he is given great insight into who Jesus is – insight that far exceeds the wisdom of the Pharisees who think they are experts about such things.

So, you might say that, with his response to the disciples, Jesus is enlightening all of us about the true moral nature of the universe.

A Message for our Time

There is much in this story that speaks to us where we are in our lives at this time. We seem to be living in a moment, after all, where life is hard. People are struggling, I know that they are. They are having a hard time paying the bills. People are really struggling with difficult emotions and mental health challenges. Others are struggling to find better health.

We are seeing these things in our own lives or in the lives of the people that we love, and we often don't know how to respond. The easiest response is usually the most ancient one. The easiest response it to ask, "Who sinned that such a thing should happen?" We look for someone to blame.

Blaming the Victims

And it often easiest to blame the victims themselves. If you are the one struggling, how easy it is to blame yourself. "I am too weak." "I am too lazy." "I made the wrong choices," you repeat the litany to yourself. It is also stunningly easy to blame the people you love when they have their own troubles.

I'm not saying that there never are reasons for why people struggle and I'm not saying that they never have anything to do with it themselves. But I would say that those reasons are usually far more complex than our blame and shame reflexes would imply. Even more important, becoming fixated on those reasons, unless you are addressing them in a constructive way, will rarely get you out of the situation.

No, adopt the approach that Jesus takes. Focus instead on where, in this situation, there might be an opportunity for God's works to be revealed. If you do, you may be amazed at the wonderful new thing that God brings about. Enlightenment in some form will follow!

Our Journey Together

This doesn't just apply to our personal struggles, but also to where we are in our journey together as a congregation. We are in a moment in the story of this church when we are struggling with how our ways of being church just don't seem to work like they used to. And we feel as if we are flying blind and don't quite know what to do to meet our future.

And what is the temptation when we are living through such difficult times? The temptation is to look around to find someone to blame. "Who sinned," we want to know, "that the church should be brought to such a state." And we can usually find someone to blame and, oh, it feels so satisfying when we do.

But it doesn't actually solve anything. The causes are always much more complicated than the simplistic blame we choose to lay. And the cycles of criticism that ensue are rarely, if ever, constructive. I wonder what Jesus would say when we asked who to blame, this person or that person for the struggles we are dealing with in the church?

"Neither," he would say "but this present challenge has emerged so that God's works might be revealed in us." How might such a radical rethinking of the issues transform how we see the challenges before us today?