

St. Margaret's Church, Annapolis; March 2, 2008

The Rev. Dina van Klaveren, preacher

Lent 4, Year A-- John 9:1-41

“Who sinned?”

As I pondered the story of Jesus' interactions with the man born blind, I remembered a novel I read several years ago. The novel is Stones from the River by Ursula Hegi. It is set in World War I era Germany- in a small village near Dusseldorf. The story is experienced through the eyes of Trudi, who is a *zwerg*, a dwarf. She was born looking and moving differently than other village children. Being a dwarf in her community means that Trudi is the constant example of what could happen to you if you don't follow your mother's rules, if you lick sugar off the sugar spoon...mothers and grandmothers warn their children –sometimes within earshot of Trudi herself- that if they do this or that they will turn into a *zwerg* like Trudi. Trudi grows up internalizing the blame of the village, and she joins her village in wondering: “Who sinned? Me or my parents?”

Parts of Trudi's experience feel familiar, despite how unfamiliar I am with her German village, despite how unfamiliar I am from life lived as an outcast from birth because of a physical condition. Many of us share the tendency to look for reasons to blame ourselves or others in the face of tragedy, suffering or loss. This tendency has been around for a long time, predating us, predating World War I Germany, predating Jesus and the man born blind.

One of the focal verses for our 5th and 6th graders at their lock-in on Friday night was Proverbs 11—God rescues the godly from danger, but he lets the wicked fall into trouble. (*New Living Translation*) And yet other parts of our Biblical story, like Job, support another approach to living with tragedy, suffering and loss. But this first way, the way of assigning blame and turning tragedy into punishment, finds wide support in Scripture, in our culture, and in our own experiences. We find that we consciously or unconsciously have been doing a subtle type of bargaining with God – an unspoken deal that comes into the light when the deal falls apart. Like when someone is diagnosed, or when a couple longs for a baby, or when a friend is paralyzed in a tragic accident. In the face of such tragedy, suffering, loss we find ourselves wondering: “What have I done to deserve this? What has my child done to deserve this? Why is this happening to me? Or to a person I love?”

These questions betray a widely believed myth that if we are good, everything will be fine. And by fine we may mean some version of happily ever after, like getting to live out a part of our dreams, experiencing real love with another human being, having children if we want them, when we want them, and these children are healthy and outlive us. This myth, this set of expectations insured by our own good behavior motivates some of us and mightily. Being good, or being a good person, means not hurting others or not cheating. It may mean helping others from time to time, or going to church.

We may fool ourselves into believing this mythology- into thinking we have control, that by our sinning or not sinning we control what happens to us. Sure, some actions, like physically hurting someone, have immediate consequences caused by a clear action. But when it comes to major illnesses and sufferings that have no direct connection to things done or left undone, we tell ourselves that something else we did was the cause. We fool ourselves when we think that through our generally good behavior we will reap a generally good life absent of tragedy, suffering or loss. Tragedy, suffering and loss are parts of our human condition, and so we find ourselves confused when in the midst of a life lived without too much cheating or hurting, when in the midst of a life lived helping others and going to church fairly often, we find ourselves confused by frightening news of a diagnosis or death.

Our faith in this myth about our behavior falls apart on us, our faith in the great myth about how our behavior controls things, that good behavior should get us a good, disease-free, tragedy-free life, falls apart. Our faith in this myth is shaken. Sometimes we find our faith in God is shaken too- mainly because we have confused faith in this myth with faith in God. Our faith is shaken because we have fooled ourselves for so long into thinking we are in control. We fool ourselves into thinking we control the grace of God, but God is not fooled. God is not fooled even when we treat him as a middleman helping us to broker the transaction between our behavior and the quality of our life. Even then God is not fooled into thinking that we are in control.

God keeps calling us into relationship in the midst of our confusion about the cause of tragedy, suffering, and loss in the world. God continues to restore us and the ways we live with others even as we perpetuate this mythology, a false mythology, that exposes our deep, deep need to think we are in control. This is what we hear about in John 9 this morning. “Who sinned? This man or his parents?”

The disciples ask Jesus this question as though a person could sin so much that they deserve being born blind as punishment. Like our own mythologies about control, the disciples believed a myth that said tragedy, suffering and loss resulted from sinful action. And so it was of interest to them to figure out who sinned and how, that way they could insure that they would not have a blind child – they could control their own future.

God, in the form of Jesus, doesn't participate in this line of questioning. He doesn't mess around with this false mythology about how someone may have sinned so much it required a person to be born blind. God, in Jesus, does not appear to be as concerned with causality as the disciples, or as we are. He says he is the light of the world, spits on the ground, makes some mud --a forbidden act on the Sabbath, it counts as work to make a clay mixture--spreads it on the blind man's eyes and sends him to wash in a pool.

He involves the blind man in his own restoration to wholeness. He restores this blind man into a community that not only shunned him and considered him useless, but walked by him and wondered aloud, “who sinned? This man or his parents?” Can you imagine what it felt like to overhear those questions throughout your childhood? Growing up as a dwarf in Germany or a blind man in the Near East, hearing the people of your village wondering these things about you and your family? Can you imagine what it feels like to be the example to others not to sin? Jesus could imagine it. In his deep compassion for this suffering man he restores him physically to sight and in his process restores him into community, granted- a community not quite ready to accept him as someone healed and able to see.

God is not spending all of God's time doling out good lives and bad lives. God is not handing out suffering to some for their sins, tragedy or loss to others. Rather, God is putting healing energy into curing whatever it is that makes us an outcast. God is putting that healing energy – that same energy that heals the man born blind- into restoring us to relationship with God most importantly, and also to relationship with other people.

That is the God we experience. That is the God that draws us in no matter how bad or good we have been or think we are. What do we do when God draws us in? Do we go and wash in the pool? Do we recognize Jesus searching us out after healing us – checking on us and asking us to be in relationship with him?

God calls each one of us, as individuals, and as the community, the Body of Christ, to be drawn into the compassion of Christ, to recognize Christ the healer in our lives even when we suffer. Christ calls us to follow him, to participate in our restoration of body and soul and then follow him. Follow him all the way to the cross of Good Friday, and beyond into the joys of wholeness experienced in Easter resurrection.