

“Sight Unseen”

How many of you have heard of the concept of cause and effect? I would expect most of you. According to Robert Baloh, professor of neurology and head and neck surgery at UCLA’s David Geffen School of Medicine, it is “Human nature is to look for cause and effect.” We believe that there are direct relationships between actions or events and their consequences. Professor Baloh goes on to say, “I see this daily when I see patients. They’re all sure something they ate or something they did caused their problem and their symptoms.”

This is not just an adult way of thinking. Children think this way also. In particular, children who experience a traumatic event often make themselves the cause of the trauma. If their parent becomes ill or dies, the child blames themselves. They misbehaved, sassed that parent, or did not follow parental instructions, which resulted in the parent suffering. Both children and adults are uncomfortable with the seeming randomness of the world. We want to be able to explain why something happened that gives us control. When life does not follow the causal scheme, we are left to wonder how we are to understand life.

The people of first-century Israel were no different. They too lived by the simple concept of cause and effect. With medical science so primitive at that time, there was no way to understand that blindness at birth had a biological cause. Instead, blindness must be the result of sin and immorality.

I do wonder about the disciples’ understanding. They ask who sinned, the parents or the child. Jewish thought has been for many centuries that a child does not obtain personhood until it takes its first breath. If that is so, how does a fetus sin? The concept of Original Sin was not conceived by St. Augustine until the 5th or 6th century CE. How is it that the disciples are trying to blame the fetus for its blindness? Let’s take the child out of the equation.

Therefore, in their understanding of the world, it must be the parents’ fault. They committed a sin that caused their child to be born blind. To me, what might be the parents’ actual sin is first to abandon their child to a life of begging. The parents are around; they show up in this story in a portion that I did not read. They apparently live close enough to where their son begs that they can be summoned by the religious authorities to be interrogated. Yet he appears to be all alone in the world.

The parents’ second sin is distancing themselves from their child. They are so afraid of the religious authorities that they all but disown their son. Yes, he is a grown man, but their disavowal of their son is reprehensible. Their actions almost make this situation seem like a parable instead of a recorded event.

Despite what concerns the Pharisees and disciples, Jesus is not concerned about who, if anyone, is at fault. He sees the man’s blindness as an opportunity. Jesus says that the man was born blind “so that God’s works might be revealed in him.” What happens next takes us back to human logic or the illogic of who is to blame.

After his healing, people start arguing about whether this man is the same man they had seen sitting begging each day. Some say “yes,” and others say “no.” Or they argue he looks like the man, but he is not the same one. They cannot believe that the man they have seen begging for years could have been cured of his blindness.

The Pharisees try to get to the truth of the matter by accusing the man of lying. They cannot believe the miracle either. Instead, they also accuse Jesus of being a sinner, which by their reasoning means he could not have performed such a miracle. They even call in the man's terrified parents to testify. When the man challenges the Pharisees, they counter by saying, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?"

This confusion, challenges back and forth within the crowd, the withdrawal of the parents, and the accusations of the Pharisees leave the man in limbo. His healing has left him unrecognized, disowned, rebuked, and exiled. He wanders the streets alone, with healed eyes; he can see all that is around him, but he is alone and disoriented. I can imagine he felt like his healing was more a curse than a miracle.

What has gotten lost in the drama and heated arguments is what Jesus did. I do not mean the miraculous healing, but Jesus' seeing. The life of the town went on around the blind man day in and day out. He was a fixture like a paving stone or a wall. He was something to walk around and ignore. They might give him an extra coin if they had it, but more likely, they just avoided him. Jesus did not. He saw the man. He did not judge him. He did not wonder about who sinned. He did not concern himself with it being the Sabbath. His only concern was that the man needed healing.

As the first line of the gospel reads, "As Jesus walked along, he **saw** a man blind from birth." People had been seeing him. The disciples saw him. But Jesus went further and took notice of the man. He stopped his walk and looked at the man. As William Wordsworth wrote, Jesus was "seeing into the life of things." The man was more than an object to be avoided or pitied. He was a person whose life could be changed with a little spit, dirt, and faith.

For the healed man, finger-pointing and accusations of sin are unimportant. When the Pharisees say, "We know that this man is a sinner." He answers them, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." The Pharisees cannot abide by the healed man's testimony. All they know is that Jesus is not one of them, so he must be a sinner, despite the miracle.

When Jesus encounters the healed man again. Jesus asks him if he believes in the Son of Man. The man eagerly asks who that is. Jesus says, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." The blind man sees while all around him the townspeople, his parents, the Pharisees, and even the disciples do not see.

Blindness is more than being sighted; it is about having the eyes of our soul, mind, and heart open to the wonders of God. To the possibility that the most unlikely person, someone from Galilee or any undesirable place, can be the one we need. Or that all humanity, even the blind, foolish, egocentric, powerful, weak, strong, poor, rich, and so on, are the ones whom we help not from fear, obligation, self-righteousness, or anything else except that they are another child of God, and in God's image, and like anyone else deserving of miracles and love.

Who is the blind man in your life who needs to be seen and cared for? Who are the confused people who cannot see what is right in front of them? Who are the Pharisees who must deny the truth to hold onto their place and power? Conversely, which one of them are we?

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Emmanuel Episcopal Church
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The Fourth Sunday in Lent, Year A
8:00 & 10:30 a.m.
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Let us not judge others before we have taken a clear look at ourselves. Then let us go out and heal those who are hurting in any way that we can, because we have the power. We are the only ones who are holding us back.