Springfield Presbyterian Church

March 19th, 2023

Who Sinned?

1. Introduction

Do you remember a time in your life when you said, “There’s no

such thing as a stupid question,” perhaps to give encouragement to the inquirer? And, to some extent, there are no stupid questions – but there are good and bad questions and how we phrase them can change the conversation.

We see this right as we enter the text, just in the second verse, when the disciples asked, “Who sinned?” On its face – it isn’t a good question. But I get where their question comes from and maybe you do as well, because it is a very human question. They want to intellectualize and make sense of the mysteries of God’s healing. They want a cause-and-effect understanding that they can store in their back pocket and…who can blame them? How many times do we find ourselves in those shoes, where we try to legitimize something beyond our understanding.

I know I’ve done it plenty of times myself, even unconsciously. I’ve thought things like, “People are poor, because they were born into poverty or maybe they struggle with holding down a job.” Or, “She must be incarcerated because she did something terrible and justice is served.” And whether or not I’m accurate is beside the point, because those sentences are full of assumptions. I assume I understand poverty. I assume I understand incarceration. I assume, I assume, I assume …but why?

We assume because we want some clear and secure sense of why things happen in the world. We want to make sense of God and sense of why things happen. The disciples and us all have something important to learn here – instead of asking, “Who’s fault is it?” our better question is, “How can we help?”

1. Healing

That was the easier part of the sermon, because as I read

further in the text, I found myself in a familiar place – I found myself scratching my head at another healing text. Here’s a phrase that makes me squirm, “He has born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.”

Here are all the places I struggle, as someone who also has a disability, and I’m sure those who are confronted with chronic conditions understand. I wonder, “Are you saying that my disability, my neurological disease that will continue to make it more difficult to walk – are you claiming that God’s glory is or will be revealed in this?” I cannot believe that that is true. I cannot believe that God hopes for our pain or struggles to glorify him; I do not believe in a God that is that mean. I can believe in a God who weeps with us though and who can say, “In light of the reality of illness or injury before us, how can we build the Kingdom together.” It’s nuanced – but this disability or any infirmity is only a blessing when I take it away from causality and in my own autonomy, I make the choice to join with God to let God use this for God’s glory.

Healing is complicated. In this case, the man is indeed healed in a very tangible way – he was blind and now he can see. The man himself is rejoicing, but when we look around the landscape, he seems to be the only one perfectly content and joyful to accept the healing. The pharisees are stuck in their own ways and I don’t want to pick on them, because they are in a place that many of us have been. They want to say, “We know what we know and nothing you do or say will change our minds.” They see healing, they hear it from the man himself, but they are stuck in a challenging place. How can a man heal, he who sins – they don’t see Jesus there yet.

The young healed man’s parents are even cautious. They tell folks to go ask their son, he’s of age, and plus – shouldn’t the healed get to tell their own story? But it isn’t that simple – they are cautious, because if they name the healing, they will be kicked out of the synagogue. They might be happy for their son, but they have a cultural right to be fearful.

And, they were right, to some extent – because once the young man tells his story and accepts Jesus, he’s tossed out of town. Telling your truth, especially when it opposes the power of empire, usually gets you in a bit of trouble.

1. Questions about Healing

So, we’ve reached this intersection of questions and healing and

we might wonder – what does this text tell us today? First, it motivates us to ask good questions. Again, instead of trying to legitimize a bad situation, one of the best questions we can ask is, “How can we help?”

The question allows us to remove the bar across our back – the weight of needing to know why, the weight that makes assumptions not grounded in reality, the weight for us to judge one another’s challenges against our own. When we ask the right questions, we are less caught up in the intellectualization of something but more interested in the person, the human, right before us who is in a time of struggle. Asking good questions not only benefits those who are suffering, but benefits ourselves – everyone wins – because we are able to be present to one another in profound and powerful ways.

Part of good question-asking invites us to lean into the mystery. We are human, we want to know the answers, we want to make sense of a situation, it is reasonable that we want answers so we can feel more secure in this world and in our lives. Here’s the tough and beautiful reality – God never promised answers, that was never part of any covenant. Mystery, from the beginning of creation, has always been part of God’s way of operating in the world.

What does the afterlife look like? I don’t know. Why do bad things happen to good people? I don’t know. What does resurrection look like? I don’t know. Perhaps all of the “I don’t know” statements feels defeating, but there is something about surrender in not needing to know answers to the unanswerable. It is also a beautiful recognition again that we trust in a God who is known to us and unknown to us and lives in this incredible mystery that is powerfully beyond our human comprehension. When we lean into mystery and let go of all those unanswerable questions…we finally live in freedom.

And as for healing? Healing is something scholars have written about extensively and all I can offer are broad strokes. Here are a few take aways though: Healing is not only limited to our human bodies, but healing can be claimed in the emotional, mental, and spiritual sense of our humanness. You get to choose how to use those places where you are not healed – will you be imbittered, and maybe fairly so, or will you find a way to let God work through you in the midst of the suffering? Healing in this text is fairly black and white – he is blind and now he can see – but healing in our world can be painted in grey. Healing is a sliding scale – it looks different for everyone of us – so we are wise to let all consider what healing means for them and strip away our assumptions.

1. Summation

I pray that as you go from this place, that you take a moment to

pause before you ask a question – is it a good, life-affirming question, or is the question self-serving? Questions matter, our words matter.

I also pray that wherever you are on the healing journey, for all of us struggle in some shape or form, that you give yourself some grace in reading this passage and passages that talk about healing. Pray to God about where you long to be healed, what that might look like, and how God can journey with you in this life.

May we lean into the uncertainty of life and the mysteries of God, for we journey on this Lenten road filled with beautiful mysteries, above all – the love that is so profound that cannot and will not succumb to death, but will be powerfully present in resurrection hope and mystery. Amen.