

Punishment for Sin? Really?

Today we have passed the halfway point through the season of Lent. If you have given up something you're really missing, you may be happy to know that. If you've added something to your normal routine, you have a few more weeks to make it a habit. Today it is obvious we are moving along, because we've lightened up, briefly, with flowers on the altar and rose-colored vestments. Next week we will take a deep breath and march on.

This year I've been giving you the big picture, because that's what our Sunday readings are doing, telling the whole story of how God made us, how we turned away from God, and what God is doing to make it all right again. Big pictures can be seen in a lot of different ways, so I'm glad you're getting to hear other perspectives as well. Last week Judith encouraged us to walk with Jesus to the cross and sit there. Next week Bishop Epting will bring another voice to our ears. Today I get to tell you more about how I see it.

Last week's Gospel reading about the woman at the well was a long one. This week's story of the man born blind is even longer! It covers an entire chapter. Perhaps you got lost or distracted as it was read. So I'll give you my summary right at the beginning: Sin is not about judgment and punishment. Sin is about blindness.

As Jesus and his disciples are walking along, they pass by one of the many beggars by the side of the road. One of them is blind, and the disciples figure it's a good time to get an answer to something that's been bothering them. Do we suffer because of our own sins, or because of our parents? Surely someone must have sinned for this man to be born blind. So they ask Jesus to sort it out for them. He gives a typical response to their question. They've got it all backwards. The man isn't being punished for sins. He's going to reveal God's glory. His darkness is going to be turned into light. So Jesus makes some mud with his saliva – which sounds gross to us, but at the time saliva was thought to have healing properties – and puts the mud on the man's eyes. Then he tells him to wash in the "Sent" pool. Sure enough, the man is healed. God is glorified. But that's only the beginning of the story.

Everyone has been so used to seeing the blind beggar that when they encounter him again, they think he must be someone else. They don't believe their eyes, and they don't believe him when he tells them that he's the same man. They need some authoritative proof, so they take him to the religious authorities, the Pharisees. The Pharisees are skeptical. They're caught up in their rules. This healing happened on the Sabbath, when no work should be done. Their rules say that making mud is work, so Jesus must be a sinner for working on the Sabbath. Furthermore, they refuse to believe that the man was born blind. So they call in his parents. The parents are so frightened by the Pharisees that they pass the buck back to their son. Sure enough, when the son insists that a miracle has occurred, they toss him out on his ear. But that's still not the end of the story. Now Jesus seeks the man out. He brings him back into community with God. After doing so, Jesus offends the Pharisees once more by calling them both blind and sinful. This is not going to end well for Jesus.

As we approach Good Friday, there will be preachers who will forget the message of this story. They will rail against the sins of their congregation. They will talk about the judgment to come.

They will graphically describe the suffering and torture of Jesus to magnify our own sinfulness. That approach is enshrined in the violent movie known as “The Passion of Christ,” in which the gruesomeness of Good Friday is glorified and Easter barely gets a mention.

In the first few verses of today’s Gospel, Jesus rejects that approach when he says, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.” Don’t equate sin with punishment, Jesus says. Don’t judge others. Now don’t get *me* wrong – I believe that sin absolutely has consequences. It makes a big difference whether we walk toward or away from God. To be separated from God for eternity will surely be hell. But we must be very careful when we say “We see,” or we may receive the same condemnation as the Pharisees did.

Several months ago Bishop Epting preached a memorable sermon that I still hear people quoting. In it he said that we are justified by grace but we will be judged by our works. God has freely forgiven us of all our sins. There is nothing we can or should do to merit that forgiveness. However, that does not mean we should just sit back and bask in grace. It is precisely because we are forgiven that we have work to do. We must respond to God’s gracious love. From that response come the works by which we will be judged.

That’s why I choose to look beyond Good Friday to Easter. Yes, we will march to the foot of the cross over the next two weeks. Yes, we will reflect on the many ways in which we turn away from God. We will try to imagine the hopelessness of the disciples. But from our post-Easter perspective, we cannot live without hope. We know that our sins have been forgiven. We know that death is not the end.

Today Jesus has told us that sin is not about judgment and punishment. Sin is about blindness, blindness to God and blindness to the presence of Christ in one another. In a sense we are all born blind, born in a way that the works of God might be revealed in us. So seek the light of Christ. Use the rest of this time of Lent to reflect on how *you* can reveal the works of God in *your* life.

[Lent 4: 1 Samuel 16:10-13; John 9:1-41.]