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4th Sunday in Lent

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First Congregational Church UCC of Burlington, VT.

One thing I know:

SING: "I once was lost, but now am found, 'twas blind, but now I see."

These words came first from the lips of the healed blind man in today's gospel lesson from John; but most of you know them best as part of the hymn written by John Newton, "Amazing Grace". In his first career Newton was a sea captain, and a slave trader. During a violent storm he cried out for Christ's mercy, was "saved" and eventually became a minister of the gospel and an important part of the abolitionist movement in England. "Twas blind, but now I see."

This passage – and indeed, this whole Lenten season of readings from the gospel of John - is one of the most profound and rich in the whole NT. Layer upon layer of symbolic meaning, the contrast between light and darkness, the arrogant mind-games played by the Jewish establishment, and the progression in the human spiritual journey from blindness to understanding. There are lots and lots of sermons in this one story.

And as so often happens, God often seems to have a sense of humor in the timing of the lectionary and reality, at least in my life. Many of you have heard that this past week I had a third brush with eye problems, this time another tiny tear in the retina of my right eye (it was the left, last time).

I had immediate laser repair on Thursday when it was discovered. It doesn't hurt, but there are some new floating spots I must learn to live with, and some sobering thoughts about how much I – and most of us – take for granted the incredible capacity for vision with which we are gifted. So I am very aware of Jesus' compassion for this man blind from birth. I also hope that if the moment comes that Jesus wants to offer

me the healing of my eyes in person, that his tool of choice will be a laser and not a paste made of mud and spittle....

There are two parts of the story that grab my attention this time round:

First, off the bat, we have an in-your-face statement of the question of theodicy: why do bad things happen? Why do people suffer? The disciples are walking by a blind beggar by the roadside and their question is not, "How can we help?" but instead, "Who sinned, this man or his parents?" The blind man is only an object lesson to them, as they had all been taught by their elders that it is sin which causes suffering, its cause and effect.

Jesus is a different kind of teacher. He says, "Neither one of them sinned. He was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him." Now from our perspective, we're not so surprised to hear that suffering is not always caused by sin. But I'm really bothered by the second sentence: do you mean to say that God causes suffering just for the purpose of God's Messiah coming along and providing a healing miracle to impress the crowd? That reason doesn't do much for me either.

Scholar Bruce Pewter helps me out with a slightly different translation:

"It was not that this man or his parents sinned." End of sentence. Begin with new subjective clause the text continues. "SO THAT the works of God might be made manifest in him, WE must work the works of God who sent me while it is day. Night comes, when no one can work."

The slightly different of order of words helps me understand this story, and I don't think it's just playing with semantics. We could even turn that sentence around and it would make perfect sense. "WE must work the works of God, so that the works of God might be made manifest in this person. " Jesus' emphasis is not on the one who is healed in this instance. His healing does reveal the work of God, but it's not just about him. The emphasis is on those who do the healing, on those who can make God's work evident

in the world. The time is beyond ripe to get on with healing the world around us, and we should do as much good for others as possible while it is still day, while we can.

Notice Jesus uses the first person PLURAL. Jesus did not say “I” must work the works of God; he included all of us disciples in saying “we”. Healing is to be an effort of the whole community. WE must be about reconciliation, empowerment and healing of others RIGHT NOW, while we live, while we’re physically and mentally able, while the light is still with us.

The question of suffering is not why, but what we can do about it.

My second observation may have escaped you if you have only heard this story once: if you want to, look at the Bible to see what happens to Jesus between these words in verse 7 up until verse 35.

Jesus disappears. He is no longer on stage. Already in verse 8 people are asking “Where is he?” but no one seems to know. The main character of this gospel suddenly drops out of sight. Who’s left on stage? Well it is the “man who was born blind,” of course.

Isn’t it odd that he doesn’t have a name, even though he is a male? Is it because he is just “am hareetz”, a lower class person of the land? Is it because he is Everyman, representative of you and of me, a stand-in who represents all the suffering of humankind? Suddenly, he is in the limelight and he seems to take on a noble bearing when he becomes the primary character. His dignity, his honesty, his bearing deserves to be named. Let’s call him Christopher, which means “bearer of the Christ,” because he is such a powerful witness to the light found in Jesus.

We are all “the man born blind.” Nearly every human being is born with some sort of challenge. Sometimes it’s obvious and physical, like blindness. Living in an a bit more enlightened age, we are not accustomed to thinking of such physical disabilities as caused by sin or evidence of God’s punishment. (Reference to health care outcome)

We often do our best to provide resources to help such individuals meet life's challenges.

Others are born "differently abled" in ways that are not physically obvious: those with mental illness or other brain impairment may not look any different than the rest of us, but they face huge challenges everyday which are not always met with such empathy and offering of resources. There are also those whose gender is more fluid than what society considers to be the norm. There are those whose color and ethnic customs also cause them to be labelled as "different". Indeed, for the vast majority of human children born into suffering, it is not a physical or mental handicap, but simply the circumstances of being born into poverty or war.

Who sinned, these people or their parents? Jesus has taught us this is the wrong question. In fact, the right question is not a question at all, but rather an action: How can we make God's light and love known by healing, by changing the circumstances of those who suffer?

Much of the scripture between verse 7 and 35 is really very silly. The Pharisees and temple officials, as well as the neighbors and the parents, get embroiled in this pointless, roundabout argument, reminiscent of some of the silly roundabout arguments we've heard from Washington lately. "This healing happened on the Sabbath! That's a terrible no-no!" "Where is this fellow called Jesus? Why is he hiding from the public eye?" "Who knows if he's from God or the devil? How can we tell?" "Let's see what that man born blind has to say." "But he's a nobody, his word is not important." "Somebody go arrest his parents and get them to talk". On and on it goes. Where is the real honest truth in this story?

I think it is in the man himself, Christopher, the man born blind. Here is the truth of a human being whose life has been transformed, who is no longer a faceless beggar who people walk by every day without noticing. Here is Christopher, standing tall and

steadfast and insistent on the truth. Twice he tells them. “He put mud on my eyes, I washed and now I see. One thing I know, that though I was blind, now I see.” One thing I know.

The officials haul him in and out of court, they haul his parents and neighbors in and out of court. (Sounds familiar, doesn't it?) But he sticks with the same truthful testimony. He doesn't try to fit himself into their theological or legal categories. He testifies to his healing with plain answers.

Close your eyes for a moment, and imagine hearing him speak in court:

“One thing I know is this: the world I can now see is beautiful. The blindness that I had had from birth is simply gone. How this man Jesus did it, why he did it to me, when he chose to do it – I don't have answers for all these things, and I won't make things up just to satisfy your inquisition of me. They are not the important things. What IS important is the truth of my liberation from the blindness. The affirmation of my life as one of worth and of beauty. The invitation to me to go and do likewise. That is the truth that stands at the center of this story, and that is enough. “

What is the one thing you know? The one thing that we, together, know?

Last week we talked about it as the gift of God's amazing love in Jesus Christ. I suspect most of you have experienced that, in way one or another, somewhere along your own spiritual path. What we learned in this week's story is that we inherit from Jesus himself the call to mission and action.

We are called to work the works of God in the light of day, now, urgently : to help others stand tall and to recognize their self-worth; to help them get through the small or great challenges life has given them; to teach them the amazing and abundant love of God.

Might we all become the central part of Jesus' story, as this man did, serving others and reflecting Christ's love into the world around us. Can you also be a Christopher? What is that one thing YOU know for sure, what one truth?

Tell the story of the healing power of Christian community in your own life. Offer the same kind of healing and acceptance and love to others in our midst so that they, too, may find liberation. Be willing to speak truth to power, as he did in court. And lift up the truth of your own life like the multi-faceted gem it is, reflecting the light of Christ into the world around you.