

San Lorenzo Community Church

United Church of Christ

Sermon from Rev. Annette J. Cook

Sunday, March 26, 2017

Hear now a reading from the Gospel of John 9:1-41

⁹ As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. ² His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

³ "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him. ⁴ As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. ⁵ While I am in the world, I am the light of the world."

⁶ After saying this, he spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man's eyes. ⁷ "Go," he told him, "wash in the Pool of Siloam" (this word means "Sent"). So the man went and washed, and came home seeing.

⁸ His neighbors and those who had formerly seen him begging asked, "Isn't this the same man who used to sit and beg?" ⁹ Some claimed that he was.

Others said, "No, he only looks like him."

But he himself insisted, "I am the man."

¹⁰ "How then were your eyes opened?" they asked.

¹¹ He replied, "The man they call Jesus made some mud and put it on my eyes. He told me to go to Siloam and wash. So I went and washed, and then I could see."

This ends the reading from the Gospel of John. Thanks be to God.

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Jamie Foxx, after winning the Academy Award for Best Actor for playing Ray Charles in the film biopic *Ray*, gave an emotional and moving acceptance speech. He began,

“I’ve got so many people to thank here tonight and first I’m going to start it out with Taylor Hackford [the Director of *Ray*]. You took a chance, man. That love for Ray Charles was deep down in the earth somewhere and you opened it up. It’s cracked open. And it’s spilling. And everybody’s drowning in this love. I thank you for taking a chance on this film. And thank you for waiting 15 years to get me to do it. I want to thank you.”

In one scene in the film, Charles is playing his music in a bar and a group of angry churchgoers storm in, accusing him of blasphemy, “You’re turning God’s music into sex” and “All ya’ll goin’ straight to hell!” Rarely short of a quick retort, Charles leaned into the microphone: “Everyone that wants me to keep playing let me hear an ‘Amen!’” An “AMEN!” roared from the crowd and the good times kept on rollin’.

Ray Charles, who died in 2004, was a charismatic, brilliant, driven, and immensely-talented singer-songwriter and performer. He will be remembered for all these traits. He will also be remembered because he accomplished so much in his long career and he did it all as a blind man. Charles went completely blind at an early age, but through the aid and encouragement, especially of his mother — and through his own force of will — Ray triumphed in the music field.

But, in the face of his success, one of the specters raised in the Charles’ life is *why* a black child already born into poverty becomes blind. Why is this allowed to happen? Does he deserve to be blind? Is it something he did or didn’t do? Is it something his parents did or didn’t do?

In a moment of theological reflection in the film, Charles is having an argument with his devoted wife Della Bea Robinson, who is played by Kerry Washington. Bea pleads, “The only thing that can help you is God, Ray!” But Charles quickly turns on her: “Don’t you talk about God! You have any idea how it feels to go blind and still be afraid of the dark. And every day, you stand and pray just for a little light, and you don’t get nothing. Cause God don’t listen to people like me.” Bea warns, “Stop talking like that.” But Charles presses on, “As far as I’m concerned, me and God is even, and I do what I damn well please.”

These theological tensions are not new. We see them at the beginning of the scripture reading today. Jesus and his disciples meet a man blind from birth. His disciples ask, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?” That’s how we think about these things, isn’t it? Somebody must have messed up big time for this man to be suffering now. This man’s suffering must be “paying the price,” he must be living the punishment.

That’s how many people see me — in the first couple of years after coming out to my family, my mother held onto the belief that she did something wrong in her parenting for me to turn out to be gay. She carried such guilt. It took many years for her to see that being gay is not a problem to be solved or a punishment to endure but a person to be loved.

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Amy Becker tells the story of eleven years ago, she and her husband welcomed home their new baby girl, Penny. She writes:

“Penny had been diagnosed with Down syndrome a few hours after her birth, and the months that followed were hard for us. She had a few little holes in her heart. She needed tubes in her ears. She needed early intervention services. Her future seemed uncertain. She also slept through the night at seven weeks, lavished smiles upon anyone in view, and worked hard at everything from sitting up to walking. She was broken, and beautiful, and beloved. Just like us.

It took much prayer, rereading Scripture, and the experience of loving this child for me to understand that the words beautiful and broken, vulnerable and gifted, described both Penny and me.

It took a while longer to be able to see Penny instead of her seeing diagnosis and the list of potential problems she would encounter. When I thought of her in terms of Down syndrome, I thought of her as separate from me. But once I was able to see her—her bright smile and sparkling eyes, her love for reading, her tender concern for other people—then I also began to see how connected we were. Of course we shared a genetic and social connection, but as I understood the fullness of Penny's humanity I began to see our spiritual connection. I started to believe that even though I was able to hide my vulnerability, it was present in me, and if I had the courage to expose it to others, I would enter more fully into my own humanity. If I became willing to expose my needs, I opened myself to receiving love. And as I started to receive love from people like my daughter, people whose gifts are not always valued by our culture, I started to believe that every human being has gifts to offer, if only we have eyes to see.”

When we start asking ourselves “why me?” “Why did this happen to someone in my family?” we start giving ourselves answers that reinforce our state of being is somehow less-than, our state of being is not sufficient, not adequate. Those with disabilities, those who are different, those who do not look like my definition of “normal,” we judge them, we give them back stories of poor judgments and poor decisions.

Whether it is blindness or deafness or physical disability or crippling disease, we want the answers to fit into a box so we can “know” what went wrong . . . because that’s how we think about it – we think this is wrong. I must have done something wrong – or you must have done something wrong – or you must be paying the price for something that someone did wrong. After all, I’m always right and this is wrong.

The disciples are only expressing to Jesus this common bigotry. Jesus refuses to accept the false dilemma: Do you pick (a) this man is blind because of his own sin, or (b) this man is blind because of his parents’ sin? If this were a multiple choice test, then Jesus did the equivalent of scribbling a third option in the margin and circling it: (c) “None of the above.”

Then he offers another choice (d): “He was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.”

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Do you see that shift? Jesus recognizes and empowers those who previously had no voice, had no place in society, those who were seen as objects or topics of conversation but not members and neighbors.

The scripture begins with the disciples *talking about* the man born blind from birth. Then we see “the neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar” *talking about* him. Finally, the man speaks for himself. He confesses that he doesn’t know the answers to all of their questions, but he adds, “One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.”

The Gospel lesson doesn’t end there. It is a vital shift that the marginalized blind man is healed and empowered to speak for himself, but Jesus presses the shift even further: “I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.”

Talk about an upset! This is a tremendous reversal. Jesus is saying, not only do I come to give eyes to see and ears to here, but also, I come to give blindness — or put another way — *to reveal the blindness of those who think their sight and judgment is perfect.*

It reminds me of Lady Justice, who is a personification of the moral force of our judicial systems. Lady Justice hold the scales of judgment with a blindfold tied tightly around her eyes. It is a reminder that despite our best intentions of being unbiased, our prejudices all too often affect our judgment. Our “rightness” makes us just as blind as the man born blind.

This story challenges us to recognize the ways in which we are blind and can’t recognize our blindness — and the ways in which we are wrong about the blindness of others.

There is hope in the life of Ray Charles. Charles was being escorted to a concert hall in Augusta, Georgia, where he was scheduled to perform, but the building was being picketed by a group protesting that the concert was going to be segregated with only whites allowed on the main dance floor and blacks restricted to the balcony.

A young black man managed to get Charles’ attention through the noise of the crowd chanting “NO MORE SEGREGATION!” but Charles response was “That’s how it is. This is Georgia” and “Look man, there ain’t nothing I can do about that. I’m an entertainer. And we all gotta play Jim Crow down here.”

But there was a moment when the white organizer of the concert interrupted their conversation to put-down the protester — and, suddenly, Charles began to *see*. He *confessed* to his manager, “He’s right” and ordered the band back on the tour bus.

When the white organizer of the concert threatened to sue him, Charles reversed his former strategy, and now said to the white man, “I can’t do nothing about it. Ain’t nothing I can do, man.” He remained physically blind, but saw for the first time what he could do to help in the struggle *against* racism and *for* Civil Rights. Twenty years later in 1979, in one of those great reversals of history, Ray Charles, who was banned for life from playing in the state of Georgia for his refusal to play Jim Crow concerts, was offered a public apology by the state legislature of Georgia, and his rendition of “Georgia on My Mind” was made the official state song.

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Our challenge in this season of Lent is to acknowledge our blindness and seek the light. Our challenge is to see that all of humanity struggles, all of humanity needs compassion and kindness. All of humanity needs dignity and civil rights. All of humanity needs love. Amen.