

**Sermon: March 20, 2020 – John 9: 1-41 (Lent IV) – virtual worship, online
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB - Rev Greg Wooley**

We live in a time of questions and answers.

Most of the questions we have right now, revolve around the global pandemic, and the most effective responses to it: how socially isolated do I need to be? How many days, weeks, months, will “social distancing” be in place? What can we learn from the experience of other nations, in hastening the recovery process?

Some of these questions have good, solid answers, and sometimes the answers aren't popular... so the same questions get asked over and over again, with hopes of hearing a different answer. At this point I must express my appreciation for the clarity with which our health officials are speaking, there really isn't much to question in the main messages: Keep your distance. Wash your hands. Do not compromise the health of others.

Jesus, as indicated in the 9th chapter of John, also lived in a time of questions and answers.

Raymond E. Brown, a Catholic Theologian who wrote what I consider to be THE definitive commentary on John's Gospel, points out that in this account of Jesus giving sight to a man born blind, the healing itself takes a total of two verses (vv. 6-7), while the interrogations following the healing go on for no less than twenty-seven verses (vv.8-34). Rather than basking in the excitement of new possibilities, the freshly-sighted man and his parents have to answer round after round of useless, pointed questions, and are so upset by the answers that the man is barred from the Synagogue. Pause to think of that for a moment: practically, a person can see for the first time ever. In our time and place we need to be careful not to bring any “ableist” assumptions to what this would mean, but in that culture, not being blind would open life possibilities outside of making one's living by begging. This should have been a moment of great joy. And theologically, this should have been a moment when the brightness and clarity of Jesus, the light of the world, evoked nothing but wonder. Yet what takes up all the air space? People with questions, insisting they be answered.

Most of these questions are just irritating – questions that don't even listen to the answer, the kinds of questions that people living with disabilities have to deal with all the time (and as an aside, if you haven't checked out the TV series, “You Can't Ask That!” now would be a good time to check it out). Most of the questions are annoying, but one of the questions hits particularly close to home, and it comes right at the beginning, before the healing takes place.

Seeing this man, the disciples – yes, that group who had the benefit of experiencing Jesus every day, and yes, our direct spiritual ancestors as followers of Jesus – inquire not after his wellbeing, but instead ask this: “who caused his blindness, his sins or his parents' sin?” Jesus makes clear that their question is completely wrong-headed, and reaches beyond words to begin the man's process of healing, rubbing mud on his eyes and sending him to the pool of Siloam to complete the process; but even with the healing that is enacted, the caustic nature of the disciples' question, remains.

In recent weeks, media reports indicate that this exact type of question has been asked with unfortunate frequency. “Oh, they have coronavirus, what did they do wrong? Did they not wash their hands? Did they travel someplace too risky? Did they not follow the rules?” And yes, by now we should all be following the recommended health practices, but nothing is gained by these kinds of speculative questions. Even more cruel, has been the tendency toward ethnic profiling, especially in the early days of more localized coronavirus outbreaks.

Blaming and speculating are such destructive things. A few days ago, United Church Ministers and lay representatives from across our Chinook Winds (South Alberta) region connected for a

video conference. As we talked about some “victim blaming” that was going on, one of the participants reminded us that back in the early 1980s, this is what the gay community had to deal with, as fear related to AIDS was running rampant. People who were HIV positive had certain assumptions made about them and their behaviour, members of the gay community with any kind of illness symptoms assumed the worst and/or had the worst assumed about them, and the whole thing was frightening and ugly, frequently accompanied by homophobia and violence. An Indigenous member of our videoconference also recalled the way that his community is continually subjected to this tendency to “blame the victim”. And as we heard of these difficult experiences, the hope was not to reverse the cycle and start shaming the blamers; the hope was to break that cycle, and to redouble our efforts to offer support and kindness and care for people experiencing all manner of trauma right now, while still naming the inherent prejudice for what it is.

Right now, in our community and most likely, among those watching this service, there are people with cold symptoms worried that it is more, and afraid to tell anyone for fear of being judged. Right now, in every province and every nation, there are people with coronavirus who are bracing themselves for all the accusatory questions. And right now, there are people who are feeling just fine physically, but bear the emotional scars of being the subject of previous incidents of judgmental taunting. As many of us focus on how to fill the long days of social isolation – should I re-read the Harry Potter series? should I watch re-runs of the 1989 Grey Cup game (go Riders!)? Should I learn to play the bagpipes? – we also need to be aware that for many in our midst, this is a particularly tough time, as their body, mind and spirit are challenged during these early days of social distancing.

And as that comes to mind, there are actions to be undertaken. I’m so encouraged by the number of people who have stepped forward so quickly in the congregation to be “care contacts” and “care couriers”, some reaching out by phone calls and texts and emails and who knows, maybe Skype or FaceTime, others running necessary errands to those who cannot or should not be going out to get things themselves. I know that there are many other circles of care in your lives – family, friends, neighbours, whom you are keeping tabs on, and the “Stone Soup” group here in town is exhibiting that new Canadian phenomenon known as “caremongering.” A number of you have checked in with me to see how my family unit is doing, and I appreciate that greatly. This all reminds me of the sentiments expressed in the opening prayer today, from Rabbi Yosef Kanefsky: “let every hand that we don’t shake become a phone call that we place. Let every embrace that we avoid become a verbal expression of warmth and concern. Let every inch and every foot that we physically place between ourselves and another, become a thought as to how we might be of help to that other, should the need arise.” In these days of isolation, and all the emotions swirling around that, let these be our actions.

One more thing in today’s reading from John that sheds light on our situation today, is the consistent answer given by the formerly-blind man when grilled by one group after another. They want to know how Jesus healed, they raise questions about the legitimacy of this upstart healer, they want some toe-hold to turn this good experience into a bad one. And as they vainly seek an opening for negativity, the recently healed man keeps saying, “you can ask all these questions but it doesn’t change the only thing that actually matters: I was blind, and now I see.” His encounter with Jesus illuminated him in ways that could not be taken away, no matter what consequences his questioners would enact.

This causes me to wonder: what are the way that I personally, and we as a community of faith, have been changed by our encounters with the light of Christ? How does that Christ-light in others call to us? In what ways have our deepest and best selves been called forth, and how can that impact these highly unusual days? In a way, it is the same point made before: especially in times of great challenge, our experience of the words and actions and resurrection

of Christ Jesus change the way we experience life. We know, from our experiences of God-in-Christ, the phenomenal power of love, and the importance of that love being not just conceptual but active, reaching out, going beyond what is comfortable. Whether we are dealing with illness, or feeling lonely and separated from others, or worried about employment lost or retirement investments devaluing by the day, or if we're doing generally OK and wanting to take this time as a unique opportunity to go deeper in our spirituality, or our learning, or relationships previously neglected... wherever we are, however we're doing, the light of Christ illuminates things. There's no magic solution suggested here – as noted in the gospel reading, the man could see, but his healing so angered the powers that be, that they expelled him from the community of learning and worship. But the person he was, after experiencing the healing intention of Jesus in an up-close, personal way, was a person transformed, and nothing anybody else could do, would change that.

Throughout the gospel of John, we are repeatedly brought into the presence of these themes of brightness, vision, signs of wonder, miracles bridging the gap between human and divine, as Jesus exhibits the power of a life transformed by love. As we adjust to the extraordinary measures we all live with at this time, as we reach out to others in new ways, as we find new depth in connections new and old, may the light of Christ be a tangible and meaningful presence in these days. Thanks be to God, Amen.

References cited:

Brown, Raymond E. *The Gospel According to John I-XII. Anchor Bible v.29.* Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966. Cited at <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/john9x1.htm>

CBC Gem. <https://gem.cbc.ca/season/you-cant-ask-that/season-1/72c403c1-54c9-41c9-9608-e07f82bf4b84>

Gerken, Tom. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-51915723>

Kanefsky, Yosef. Cited at <https://forward.com/news/national/441562/synagogue-shabbat-coronavirus/>

© 2020 Rev Greg Wooley, Ralph Connor Memorial United Church