



**“Inquiring Minds Want to Know”**

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Isaiah 6:1–8***

Our topic this morning is sin. That word “sin” is one we don’t talk about a whole lot in the liberal side of the Christian family. I’m guessing that a number of us hear that word and it brings up a whole bunch of stuff from our experience of Christianity, church, religion—maybe even in our families or other close relationships. And a lot of that stuff may be pretty fraught—that word “sin” has been used as a weapon to inflict so much pain and division between people, it may remind us of a hurt we experienced, or a hurt we caused. It may remind us of everything we didn’t want to talk about at church, and thus, why we’re here and not at the evangelical church just up the hill. The whole “sinners repent because Jesus died for your sins thing” may be the part of the Jesus story we feel least comfortable reconciling with our “God is still speaking” theology.

And true to the topic this morning, I have to start with a confession. When I started to prepare a few weeks ago for this sermon and realized the gospel reading for this morning was John 9, I found myself in a secret dilemma. So as most of you know, I preach at Eden only occasionally—this year I’m only on the schedule once or twice—so I was surprised to find that somehow this Sunday’s gospel text was exactly the same text I was given to preach on for Sunday, March 1, 2008. So, you see my dilemma . . . I really love preaching, I love preparing sermons, writing them, sharing them with you . . . but my work and our family schedule has been particularly busy and demanding in the past month. I mean, you all are nice enough to give me a lot of loving and positive feedback when I preach, but how likely

is it that you'd remember a sermon I gave over 3 years ago? And it was a pretty good one—and this is a difficult passage. I mean, why mess with a good thing, right? Sometimes I get half-way through a book before I remember I've read it before—and I still finish it if I enjoyed it the first time, so a good sermon is worth an encore performance, right? You see the picture. But somehow I kept imagining being at the back of the church at the end of the service and having Steve Ryken come up to me and say with that wry look in his eyes, "Nice sermon, but you know I feel like I heard that one before."

So, I will admit that am going to plagiarize a bit from that sermon, because there's only so many ways to retell this story, but thanks to Steve and maybe a little bit of my own conscience, it's not going to be a repeat.

So with that, let's talk about sin. My childhood church talked about sin every Sunday—things like "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God," "Sinners must be born again," "God wants us to repent of our sins and ask for the forgiveness that is ours because of Jesus." I was a thinking child, a reflective child. And I remember lying in bed awake at night trying to figure out how a God who "loves us, this I know" was also a God who could be so disappointed in us that he'd send people off to hell for eternity. I had long conversations with myself and with God about this. It was on my mind a lot—the theory of it just didn't make sense to me and the reality of it seemed so wrong. I mean I felt in my soul a deep knowing of a loving God . . . I remember lying on the grass looking up at the sky filtered through the leaves of a maple tree and feeling absolutely held, loved, and cherished. And at one level the concept of sin made sense. I mean even as a child I knew people could do thoughtless, unkind, and bad things—I snuck that extra cookie, told a lie, or blamed my sisters for my own misdeeds. And, I could see evil operating in the world—the Vietnam War was on my television every night, racism was all around me, good men trying to do good were murdered.

But, the real theological dilemma for me was my dad. He was an incredibly loving man, a great dad. And at that time, he worked seven

days a week on the midnight shift at the Chrysler transmission plant in Kokomo. Most Sundays, he was just coming home from work as we got ready for church. And when he had the odd Sunday off, he was too tired to go, or literally would doze off during the sermon. Somehow I got the message from my Mom and others at church that my dad was “questionable” in God’s eyes—that he was one of those sinners who needed to repent in order to guarantee his spot in heaven. Well this was unthinkable to me. I mean, what kind of God would punish my Dad for being too tired to come to church? My Dad seemed like a better guy than a lot of the men at church. He didn’t yell like the pastor did from the pulpit. This dilemma about sin and its consequences loomed very large in my child soul. I had this little metal Sucrets box—I punched a hole in the top and in the front side so I could use a little lock on it—I needed a secret place to keep my innermost secrets. One of the things in that box was a letter to God asking him to explain how he could possibly think my Dad wasn’t good enough for heaven—and saying that if it came right down to it and Mom was right that Daddy wasn’t headed to heaven, to just forget my profession of faith. I’d rather go with my Dad wherever he was going than go live with a God who would punish my Dad. I still have that little box and my childhood challenge to God.

I bet a lot of us have stories like that. Painful judgments and labels. Incredulous. Insulted. Guilt and fear. Rejection, loss of faith. Deep, painful, soul-searching questions. Anger and hurt. Titillation. Addiction. Shame. Alone. Afraid. Peering into the dark night of eternity. Searching. Questions.

So, the topic of this story in John is sin, and the relationship between sin and human suffering. And as I retell this story, this is the part of my sermon that may sound a little familiar. The story starts in the most innocent way. Jesus and his friends are walking down the street and see a man blind from birth. The fact that the narrator adds the “blind from birth” phrase here indicates that this man was probably known to Jesus and the disciples. In the gospel of Mark, the soon-to-be-formerly blind man is actually named as Bartimaeus, the son of Timaeus. But, truth be told, while the story of the healing of the blind man is in each gospel, the details vary quite a bit. Luke doesn’t name

the man like Mark does, but uses the phrase “a certain man,” in other words telling us it was someone known to them, but perhaps not by name. Matthew recounts the same story, but in his version there are two blind men, both of whom are healed by Jesus.

Our text from the gospel of John, however, is the only one of the four recounts of this story that places it in the larger context of sin and the causal relationship between sin and suffering, and specifically juxtaposing the common worldview of the Jewish community at the time and the worldview of Jesus.

So the disciples see the man, known to them to be someone born blind. And they ask their teacher, like all good Jewish students would of their teacher, “Rabbi, who sinned: this man or his parents, causing his to be born blind?” Notice as Jesus did how the disciples are mirroring the world view of the community in the question itself. We see suffering in the world, we see sin in the world, sometimes sin causes suffering, and thus all suffering is caused by sin.

Jesus, like all good Rabbis, points out the failure in their logic. In essence, he tells them, “You are asking the wrong question. Don’t look for someone to blame. There is no such cause and effect in this case. Instead, look for what God can do. There is light even in this dark situation and I’ve come so that you see it.”

And at that point, Jesus makes mud from his spit and the dust on the ground, rubs the paste on the man’s eyes, sends him to a local spring that was used for the Jews for ritual cleansing as they approach the temple, and he washed his eyes and could see.

But where the other gospels stop with the miraculous healing, the gospel of John doesn’t stop there. This author presents this miracle, or “signs,” as he calls the stories of Jesus’ otherworldly divine power in the larger context of this man and his parents and his community. Essentially, confirming the old adage “no good deed goes unpunished,” the Pharisees upon hearing the tale of this blind beggar known to everyone in the area suddenly being able to see, rush in to investigate. Once they learn that this healing was done on the

Sabbath, the community is in an uproar. Some nattering naysayers condemn Jesus and the man and his family for breaking the Sabbath law, while other “more progressive” thinkers don’t exactly take Jesus’ side but at least open the question of “how bad can he be—he may have broken the Sabbath, but he can’t be that bad can he? After all, he did make a blind man see.”

What ensues feels a lot like a first-century version of a Jerry Springer show to me, where Jerry interviews the parents, then the authorities, then the parents again, who, saying they are being intimidated by the local religious thought police, push their formerly blind beggar son up to the microphone himself in his and Jesus’ own defense. When the newly sighted man again recounts what happens and shows just a little bit of exasperation, the self-appointed police gang decides to go after him. Suddenly now he’s the enemy and not Jesus, and the formerly blind man finds himself being beat up by the religious police gang right there in front of the cameras.

In a touch of ironic comedy that I’m sure the producers of the show would love, Jesus enters stage right, coming to the guy’s rescue, but the formerly blind guy doesn’t even recognize him—being that he was blind of course, last time he saw—I mean—was with him. Jesus has to introduce himself again at which point, cue the music, the man falls to ground weeping with joy and thankfulness, worshiping him. Jesus comforts him by saying something to the effect of, “Don’t worry about those self-righteous, self-appointed, pretentious local authorities; we know who is really blind in this situation.” The camera pans the gang in the background scowling.

Cut to a commercial—when we’re back, Jesus is sitting on a chair on one side with the religious thought police gang gathered on the other side on the couch. Jerry, feigning seriousness, asks the thugs on the couch how after everything is said and done, how they feel about Jesus telling the world, before the commercial break, that in fact their self-righteous pretention and legalistic thinking makes them blinder than anyone born blind. And more chaos ensues as their fingers jab the air yelling, “You calling us blind man?” But, as the cacophony of self-righteous posturing dies down, it begins to dawn on them just a

bit, and they sullenly quiet themselves and sit there with a mixture of indignation, embarrassment, and get-me-out-of-here antsiness. Jesus, in one of his more human moments I have to say, calmly insists on having the last word, capping off the episode by saying, “You know, if you were really blind, you’d be blameless. But, since you claim to see everything so clearly, you deserve to be shown up.” Jerry, always one to seize the moment, jumps into the silence to promote upcoming shows on the evils of hair care products and people who treat their pets like children.

Comic, huh? But, as we all know, the show continues outside the studio. And, as ironic comedy turns to tragedy, I have no doubt that, as Jesus is arrested and tried by the Jewish and Roman authorities in but just a few weeks time, when the camera pans the crowd, we’ll see the faces of the guys on the couch in the throng of people cursing Jesus and screaming, “Crucify him.” Ah, we’ve seen this story and so many like it so many times before.

I have to admit, I feel anger, frustration, helplessness, impatience, and grief in the face of this story. Is this the way the story always has to end? With the self-righteous, bruised, and angry waiting to mete out retribution? With the hero inexorably headed toward the titanic clash of good vs. evil? With the hero’s followers playing bit parts as the drama unfolds in its predictable climax? As we are in the Lenten season and heading toward Good Friday and Easter, I think we have to say there’s a reason that this archetypal story played out in our faith resonates so deeply across time, culture, and circumstance. It’s because it does speak to something so deeply real and true about being human, about the inevitability of suffering and death, and about the fierce and mighty hope that we see likewise played out over and over, that redemption is possible, that life is more powerful than death, that resurrection is just as true and real as suffering and death when we open our eyes to see it.

But, as I prepared for this sermon this morning, what I notice about the story is less Jesus’ answers and more the very human questions of the disciples and the Pharisees.

This year in the senior high youth program, we've been thinking about our own individual beliefs, our own faith, and how it compares to other religions, other branches of Christianity and even to agnosticism and atheism. We started the year talking a lot about why humans have religions in the first place—I mean given there is pretty unarguable evidence of how religion functions to cause pain and suffering. Likewise, there are some who argue that a religious world view is at the core of all civilization—after all, wouldn't we all just live like savages if we didn't think our behavior mattered in some larger context? Regardless whether you think religion is a blessing or a curse, it is a ubiquitous presence in human culture, including our own. So we spent quite a bit of time this year talking about what questions in the human experience religion is a response to . . . I mean, religion must be speaking to some pretty universal, fundamental questions that arise in every individual for religion to have persisted in various forms through the millennia that humans have had anything like what we'd recognize today as human culture and experience. What are those fundamental questions that religion is trying to answer for us as human beings?

Well our kids came up with a pretty amazing list of questions—is there a purpose to life? Is there a God? Does it matter if you are bad or good? Is there life after death? Why do good people suffer? If you want to see the full list, they are scattered all over the white board in the senior high room. Interestingly enough, quite a few of them echo the question on the mind of the disciples at the start of this story. What is the relationship between human suffering and human behavior? Is suffering a punishment for sin?

Now, the thing I want us to notice this morning is that the question of the relationship between human behavior and human suffering is underneath the “religious” question of “punishment” for sin. “Sin” is a religious interpretation of an essential facet of human experience: we know we mess up, both in what we do and don't do, sometimes on purpose, more times cluelessly and thoughtlessly. And much to the disciples' surprise and to the consternation of the Pharisees, Jesus doesn't give a “religious” answer—in fact, he doesn't want to talk

about sin at all. And, we can see from the Pharisees' response, they found his very non-religious answer a deep affront to their religion.

Jesus' answer to the religious question is to tell them they are asking the wrong question—they look for cause and effect, and they are missing the big idea. They look to understand the rules of the road and are told they are on the wrong road. They look to understand the system, the way things work so that they can do the right thing, they can be good, they can do what they can to work the system—and Jesus says, oh there's something at work here all right, but it won't fit inside any system you can devise. It's grace. It's love. It's light.

But, inquiring minds want to know. Whether you're a 9-year-old with a Suet's box full of challenges to God, an Eden teen trying to figure out how to make sense of your life's journey, a young parent trying to figure out what to teach your children, a middle-aged person seeing your parents aging and moving into ill health, or an older person contemplating your own journey with mortality and meaning, humans try to make sense of the world. We try to figure it out. We try to find the patterns, the generalizations. We've got questions. Big questions.

And we are, when we are awake, very aware of our own and other's failings. And we see and experience suffering. And we do bad things and get away with them and we see others "punished" by genetics, or illness, or little bad choices, and none of it makes much sense.

I think this story from John today reminds us that the questions will always be with us . . . I mean, these guys in the story are purportedly with God every day and haven't got the answers, so I'm thinking the big questions are going to be with us for a while longer. But the story is really clear, that how we frame our questions really matters—that we need to be very mindful of the unwitting assumptions in "religious" ways of asking and answering these questions. Instead, Jesus suggested we look for joy, we look for grace, and we look for light. Celebrate when the blind see. Give thanks for God's presence. Look for the illuminating moments. Trust in that light. Trust in that love. Confess that wonder.

Like the man blind since birth, we still will have questions; we aren't even sure who it is that opens our eyes. All we know is that we have been touched. We have been held by a greater power. What seemed impossible to heal, has been healed. There was darkness and now there is light. We were blind, but now we see. I was blind, but now I see.

Thanks be to God for the questions and for the light beyond, beneath, and inside the questions. Thanks be to God.