

The Right Question

John 9:1-7

1st Pres San Bernardino

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OK- a joke that someone sent me this week:

A pastor was visiting some of his parishioners. At one house it seemed obvious that someone was at home, but no answer came to his repeated knocks at the door. He took out a business card and wrote "Revelation 3:20" on the back of it and stuck it in the door.

When the offering was counted that Sunday, he found that his card had been returned in the plate. Added to it was this cryptic message, "Genesis 3:10."

He opened the Bible to check out the citation. He knew that his message from Revelation 3:20 was "Behold, I stand at the door and knock."

Genesis 3:10 is from the story of Adam and Eve, and it reads, "I heard your voice in the garden and I was afraid for I was naked."

this has absolutely nothing to do with the sermon, except that Lent can sometimes seem long and cheerless, and laughing together is a good way to make it through the desert.

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The Session is reading a book about prayer, and the chapter they discussed this week talks about the value of listening to the Bible *not* to gain intellectual mastery of a text, but to become aware of what the Spirit is saying to *them* in the passage. I'd like to invite you to listen to this story in the same way- listening for what God might be saying to you.

The question you begin with makes a real difference in what you hear.

As this story begins, Jesus' disciples ask him a question:

"Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

That, says Jesus, is the wrong question.

This is not about sin, not his and not his parents.

It is about *suffering*, but it is not about sin.

This man's struggle- in fact, all of our struggles- provide an opportunity for God's works to be revealed in us.

No blaming. No judging. Just an opportunity for God to be seen and known.

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“Whose fault is this?” is the wrong question. But we ask it all the time. We ask it, because suffering is scary and it comes to all of us, and somehow it seems that if we could just *understand it*, it wouldn't be so painful. If we could make sense of it, it wouldn't be so hard. If we could figure out what happened, we could prevent it from happening to us or those we love.

We ask it about **illness**, so we don't feel so vulnerable: did she smoke? Did he drink too much? Was it something in the water or in his genetic makeup? Was it too much stress or bad choices?

We ask it about other kinds of **suffering**: Why can't they have children- whose fault is it? (how's *that* for an unhelpful question?) How could that marriage have come apart- I've known them since high school! Whose fault is it?

Asking ‘whose fault is this?’ is the wrong question.

The right question is **where is God at work here? What would God like to see happen? What is the Spirit up to, and how can I be part of it??**

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Whose fault is the economic downturn in San Bernardino the last 20 years? Inattentive City government? Is it the fault of Norton AFB closing? The Steel jobs leaving? The railroad? Is it the fault of the developers who tore down historic homes and built cheap apartments? Or the fault of those who don't maintain them??

Whose fault is the high level of **homelessness**? Is it due to the fact that a high number of parolees are released here? Or the fact that there is almost no safety net to help the ones who *want* to change their lives to do so?

On the one hand, the answers to those questions matter, for we must hold one another accountable to civic behavior that is in the best interest of the whole community. But in another way, there is a more important question: **What would God like to see happen? What is the Spirit up to, and how can I be part of it?? Look around: How will God's works be revealed?**

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Last weeks' Lenten reflection folder asked an interesting question:

Can you imagine an event or a conversation that was so profound that you would want to tell everyone you met about it?? It makes me want to ask: have you ever had a healing encounter with the Holy that you did not want to share bcz of how others might question it?? We do not always feel free to talk about our experiences of God. Frederick Buechner says that he was stunned when he went to teach at Wheaton College [the alma mater of my the handsome and intelligent husband, Tom :)]

He was stunned because of the freedom with which the students discussed what they sensed God was saying **to them**, how God **seemed**, what they were feeling called **to do and be**. He says that in a million years he would not have expected such conversations in the churches to which he had belonged, that if someone had started talking like that at coffee hour, he imagined the ground would have opened up and swallowed them whole!!

I can tell you that **I have often been intimidated**- even as a pastor whose job it is to point to the Presence- **because of questions** like the ones asked in the story:

- Isn't this the man who used to sit and beg? (isn't that the pastor who yelled at someone in a committee meeting? Or preached that awful sermon last month?)
- Then how are your eyes opened? (because, so often when grace comes to me, I don't know *how*- I just know something in me has changed.)
- Well, where is he now?!! (I do wish sometimes that God would show up on demand, whenever I want to produce proof)

“There are questions that keep us in our place, says artist and theologian Jan Richardson, and questions that help us find where we belong” (Jan Richardson, PaintedPrayerbook.com)

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Here's a good question: from the Westminster Confession of Faith, in our book of order.

What is the chief end (or purpose) of man (or human life)?

What is the primary purpose of human life?

A: To love God, and enjoy God forever.

Though all of us are born imperfect, and all of us have encountered pain, and all of us have suffered-

The primary purpose of our lives is love, and a holy joy.

The primary purpose is “that the works of God might be revealed in us”

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One theologian says this is what the story tells us, **“Jesus comes to heal and is willing to get down into the mud of human life to do it.”**

(Kristin Saldine, Austin Theological Seminary, in *Lectionary Homiletics* vol.19, #2)

Down into the mud of our lives
Into the midst of our unfinished, imperfect circumstances.
Not to blame, not to judge, but so that God’s work might be revealed in us.

SO; in your life
In your relationships
In the world-

Look around: what is the Spirit up to?
How is God’s glory trying to be revealed?
What are the possibilities for deep love and holy joy?

The question you begin with makes a real difference in what you hear.

Amen.