

Sermon - 3/19/2023

It started on a Friday afternoon. A buddy of mine in college got a new frisbee and so we started tossing back and forth outside the Freshman dorm where we lived. Time passed, others joined in and the tradition grew. And thus "Frisbee Fridays" were born.

Eventually it moved from a game of catch to a large-scale game of Ultimate Frisbee. We played maybe 15 or 20 on a side some weeks. They put in lights over the quad, so the games often lasted into the dark. We never kept score. And if it felt lopsided, we swapped out players until it was even again. We just played for the love of the game - running off the pressures of the week. It was glorious.

I was a regular. Every Friday for years. I was in shape back then, and got to be reasonably good. But there were a wide range of skill sets. Everyone was welcome. I remember one afternoon - when we had a few new players join us. I passed the frisbee to one of them - hit them right in the hands, and they dropped it. "Sorry!" I said. "That one took a funny turn."

A few minutes later I threw a frisbee that went right through someone's hands - bounced off their chest. "My fault!" I said - and I meant it.

The third time it happened, the other player looked back at me and smiled and said, "Why do you keep apologizing for good throws?"

It was a good question. The truth is, I didn't know why. It wasn't until a while later, that I think I started to understand...

Back to the Story - Blindness disclaimer

A brief note, as we turn back to our morning's Bible story... As the Rev. Bruce Reyes-Chow writes, we must first "name the ableist notion that 'blindness' is an inherent deficiency. Metaphors using blindness are built on the idea that this physical state of being is somehow "less than" and, regardless of the cause, is in *all* cases a problem, malady, and affliction that must be solved, healed, and fixed. The culture of Jesus' time," he continues, "did not think any differently, thus the many examples of physical limitation being the stand-in for sin and brokenness."

In this passage, the healing of a man born blind is a vehicle to point us toward deeper truths...

Back to the Story - Burden of Proof

I love the dialogue in this story. The Gospel of John was written as a sort of "readers theater" where all the action takes place in conversations. In this story it all starts with a question: "Who sinned? This man or his parents?"

Jesus' disciples are curious. He was born blind... Whose fault was it? Was it a punishment for something he was *going* to do - or was it the consequence of something his parents had done?

The disciples are asking a loaded question, though the disciples probably don't realize it. It's like a reporter asking someone - "Have you stopped cheating on your taxes yet?" It's a trap. Answer yes - and people say, "Wait a minute! You used to cheat on your taxes?" Or say "no" and imply that you're *still* cheating.

The disciples' question presupposes a certain cause and effect reality. *Somebody* must have done *something* to cause this... Jesus pushes back. Sometimes... Sometimes tragedies just happen.

Frisbee Reprise

This cause and effect framework is comforting - even in the face of tragedy - because it gives us the illusion of control.

That's what I realized about my "apologies" in frisbee. If I apologized, if I took credit for the misplay, then it meant that I was in control. I could fix it - *I* could do better next time and get the outcome I wanted.

Bruce Reyes-Chow again: "Humanity always wants to be sure and secure about the world. The crowd is certain that there must be a cause (someone's fault) and effect (God's judgment) at play... [but] when the effect is made known, they refuse to believe the *cause* that has been given credit."

Conversations with the Pharisees

The conversations are amazing. Some people say, "Hey! Isn't that the blind beggar who was out by the gate all these years?"

"No... Couldn't be. Must just be someone who looks like him. The resemblance is uncanny though..."

Sometimes we think of the ancients as gullible. Oh, they'd believe anything - it's all miracles and magic to them. But that's not what we see in this story at all. They're skeptical. Blind beggars aren't supposed to be walking around able to see.

The man overhears their talk - "It's me! *It is me!*" And he tells them how it is that he's able to see.

Well word gets around to the religious leaders, and he tells his story to them as well. They too are incredulous. This isn't how the world works.

The man sticks to the facts. “Look, I don’t know how the world is *supposed* to work. Here’s what I know. I was blind. Jesus put some mud on my eyes. And now I can see.” It’s magnificent - and effective. Instead of engaging in a back and forth, the man simply lays out the facts and puts the burden of interpretation on them.

The Pharisees push back again. They’re trying to negatively interpret this event for the man. This healing happened on the Sabbath. The Sabbath laws came from God - so some of them are certain that anyone who breaks them can’t be from God. But others wonder - trying to make sense of this man before them.

The skeptics keep digging. They call in the man’s parents. “Is this your son? Are you saying he was born blind? How can he now see?”

Now, the parents know this is a trap. So they too just stick to the facts. “This is our son. He was born blind. And now - apparently - he can see.” You’ll have to ask him if you want to know anything else.

So they call the man back in *again*. Because it still doesn’t make sense. It doesn’t fit. They have a picture of the world that makes sense. Cause and effect. Laws from God. Possible and impossible... But this man - and this Jesus - don’t fit into their neat little box.

The man born blind is fired up. “Look - I don’t know whether this Jesus is a sinner or not. All I know is I *was* blind, and now I’m not. Why do you keep asking what happened? I already told you! Do you want to be his disciples too?”

The Pharisees are furious. They fall back into their certainties... “You were born in sin. How dare you try to teach us...”

Jesus tells the Pharisees at the end of the passage that the moment their healthy skepticism passed into something else was the moment they declared they were certain - that they knew what was right.

“Come now, Jesus... Surely *WE* are not blind...”

“If you were blind, then you wouldn’t have any sin,” Jesus replies. But because you say, “I see - I *know* what’s right... your sin remains.

Beyond what’s possible

It’s amazing - this incredible elastic ability of the brain to push back on inconvenient truths. The Pharisees ask so many questions. And maybe that’s healthy, but they’re questions are loaded. They start from assumptions about the way the world works...

Maybe we aren’t so different... I think of the questions our society asks about those who are poor... Sometimes we start from the assumption that they must have done something wrong: Is he lazy? Does he spend his money on frivolous things? Maybe he’s an addict?

We like this vision - because it can free us from an obligation to help. And then we tell ourselves that our success is solely because of our own hard work and ingenuity...

The truth is complicated. It doesn't fit into our neat little box. We do make choices - all of us - that have consequences. But we don't make those choices in a vacuum - and sometimes... Sometimes tragedies just happen.

Questions are good - trying to understand. Being curious is important!
But this story invites us to pay attention to our questions and the assumptions they hold - including the assumptions they hold about what's possible.

Who knows? We may find that we are missing out on the miraculous wonders of God at work in the world...

Amen.