

March 2, 2008
John 9:1-41
First Parish UCC, Brunswick
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One Thing I Know

There are many situations in our own lives, in the lives of those around us and around the world where we hope and pray for healing – for physical, emotional, and spiritual healing. In the midst of our prayers, we wonder why some are ill and others are not. We wonder why some are cured and others not. Why some are healed (spiritually) but not cured (physically); and why some are cured but are not healed.

This past week I have thought a lot about physical healing personally. Just as Ron and I were getting into the car to go away last weekend, I slipped on the ice and experienced a compression fracture in my left arm. We spent the evening in the ER with at least 6 other people who had injured themselves on the ice. Thankfully my arm will heal on its own and doesn't even need a splint. In the ER I realized that I would be open to a little holy spit mixed with mud. But then it would have to stop snowing and then thaw long enough to even get down to mud. I never thought I'd look forward to mud season.

Yet these are injuries that come and go. Today's story is about a physical disability that the man is born with. I heard from a colleague this past week that he and his wife have found out that their second baby which is due at the end of this month only has one ventricle in his heart. Thankfully, the medical team they have talked with believe they will be able to help the baby to live a normal

life. However, the question that was posed to Jesus was, "Who sinned, this baby or his parents, that he will be born with heart problems?" One of the theological understandings of suffering in Jesus' time is that it was a result of people's own sin. Today, most of us are offended by such a question if stated overtly. Of course, it is not their sin that caused the heart defect.

Yet, I think we do still, in subtle ways, struggle with the connections between goodness and suffering. I often hear people say for example, "She is such a **good** person. It's too bad she has to suffer so." Does that mean if she was a bad person, it would be OK for her to suffer?" In some ways we want to believe that if we are good, bad things will not happen to us. That if we are good, God will check the list of good folk- and maybe check it twice- and then finding our names there will protect us. But Jesus turns this whole discussion of sin and suffering upside down.

I think Shakespeare or Monty Python would be likely to make this story into an ironic farce at the expense of the religious authorities, which in fact is one way to look at how it is presented by the writer of the gospel of John. Here a blind man is healed. It is truly an amazing grace. Yet, instead of rejoicing there is suspicion, turmoil, and interrogation. If the man hasn't sinned, it is clear that someone must have. The religious authorities are more concerned about their tradition than about the healing presence of God.

There are three primary characters in this story – the man born blind, Jesus, and the religious authorities. And there is a lot of talk about sin. The story begins with the religious authorities' implication that the man is a sinner, in the middle of the story they accuse Jesus of being a sinner, and by the end the tables are turned. The religious authorities who have been so concerned about sin are now described as the ones in whom sin remains.

The story begins with the teaching of the religious authorities that someone must have sinned – the man or his parents - for the man to be suffering in blindness. Jesus refuses to go along with their theological construct and instead uses this for an occasion for healing. WOW! Of course everyone rejoices, right? No.

People are suspicious. When the authorities find out the means of healing they accuse Jesus of being a sinner because he had the audacity to heal on the Sabbath. There were prohibitions to “working” on the Sabbath. Mixing spit with mud was like “kneading” bread, which was prohibited so clearly Jesus violated the Sabbath laws. Healing is one thing but you better do it at the appropriate time and in the appropriate way so it doesn't upset the religious teachings. Jesus stance seems to be - How absurd that religious teachings are more important than people in need of healing!

Ironically and tragically the ones (the religious leaders) most concerned about sin are the ones most caught up in it. In psychological language we might say they were projecting their own struggles with sin outward onto others. They miss what is happening right before their very eyes. They miss the presence of God's amazing grace in the person of Jesus because they are more concerned about the tradition and

the theological teachings of their tradition. Maybe the man's healing upsets them, partly, because it challenges their perceptions of their own goodness. Certainly, they are not blind.

In this story the gospel writer, John, shifts the understanding of sin. In the beginning of the story sin is presented as a concern about mis-deeds, about doing something wrong. By the end of the story we can see that John sees sin as a condition of blindness – spiritual blindness - of being blind to the presence of God in our midst.

In a wonderful twist it is the one who was born blind, who sees in all senses of the word in this story. When the authorities are pressing the man with questions, he piques their anger by suggesting that maybe they, too, want to be followers of Jesus. No way! The man stops engaging in their theological wrangling. He simply gives basic testimony. He is a witness for the Lord.

*One thing I know,
that though I was blind, now I see.*

He speaks from his own experience. He gives existential witness to the healing, gracious presence of God in the person of Jesus.

It's important for us to give our own witness in the midst of our tradition. That is why we have been invited to take time to speak with one another and with Larry Peers, the consultant, in small groups. So that each of us can say,
“One thing I know...”

As we give witness to our own experiences may we also be open in our talking and in our listening to the healing, gracious presence of God in our midst.