

The UMC of Berea
John 9.1-41
4th Sunday in Lent

One thing I know, says the unnamed man in today's story. *One thing I know: I was blind and now I see*. That is, perhaps, the simplest confession of faith in the entire Gospels, and in a season like the one we are all in right now—this season of uncertainty, disruption, anxiety, and lots of questions—this simple statement provides a wonderful model for us: the importance—the gift—of not spinning off into anxious finger-pointing or panic but keeping it simple, sticking to what we know. *One thing I know*, the man says. What is that “one thing” right now for us?

There is a lot of uncertainty, disruption, anxiety, and questioning throughout this morning's story. At its center is this “man who was blind from birth.” All around him swirl multiple antagonists, judging and doubting him, interrogating him throughout. And each of them—the disciples, the man's family and neighbors, and the Pharisees—if we're honest about it, we're likely to find reflections of ourselves.

The first are Jesus' disciples, and they do not stick around long. They are mostly concerned with who is to blame. “Who sinned?” they ask Jesus. “Rabbi, who sinned so that he was born blind, this man or his parents?”

Their question is rooted in a long-standing belief in their tradition. Hopefully, to our modern ears it is pretty troubling. We do not think of blindness as punishment or deficiency. Yes, it can add some challenges to a person's life, but that is because we have designed our societies out of consideration and preference for folks who can see. That is why the man born blind is a “beggar” in this story: because his community is not equipped to enable him to be valued as a whole person. He is isolated here, but that isolation has more to do with his society's deficiency than with any deficiency in his ability to see.

But Jesus' disciples are coming from a different perspective and worldview. For them, any sort of difference—physical, mental, economic, cultural—any difference is evidence of either blessing or punishment. And so, for the man at this story's center, they wonder who's to blame.

We all do that, at least from time to time. Lots of us are doing it now. We experience or observe especially suffering that feels random, and it is deeply human to try to place some blame. We seek some reason: if we can just understand *why* some problem has arisen, then perhaps we can avoid it for ourselves.

...except, of course, that so often we cannot. Neither the man nor his parents are to blame, Jesus says. What the disciples perceive as “suffering” cannot be easily explained, which is frustrating for us: anxiety creating. Life would be so much easier if all suffering could be predicted and, therefore, avoided. And some can be explained by human error, mechanical malfunction, long-term habits. But any attempt we might make to explain it all away just leads us down difficult, unsatisfying paths.

The man's blindness—his difference—makes the disciples anxious. And they want to chase away that anxiety with something certain. Jesus rejects their assumptions—and, with them, our attempts at easy answers.

Next—and after Jesus has caused the man to see—next come the man’s family and neighbors. And their response—like the disciples’—is rooted in their anxiety over not knowing. They have known the man all their lives, but now that he is changed, they claim not to recognize him.

They cannot accept the change that has happened. For them, his blindness was not just *one characteristic among many*; it was *his whole identity*. So, now that he’s no longer blind, they don’t know what to do with him. And their response reflects back to us some challenging questions.

How do we respond in the face of real change? Do we shrink back into old routines, cling to old habits, or can we adjust and grow into something new?

Do we label one another, confining folks to our previous experiences of them, limiting a person’s future by what we’ve known of their past? Or, do we truly believe—as we proclaim—that folks can change, that we can change, that the whole world can be—is being—made new?

As for Jesus’ disciples, their anxiety prevents the man’s family and neighbors from offering anything in the way of care. He is changed, but none of them pauses to wonder at what’s happened—to celebrate the miracle, to embrace him in a community of love. They just want *explanations*: neat, tidy answers to their questions—experiences they can predict and control.

...which is what many of us are craving right now. So much has changed—and so quickly. Old routines have been set aside. Old habits have had to break open into new practices as we have tried to adapt, to be flexible, to find new ways to care for one another and be together in these strange, uncertain days.

Like the disciples and the family and neighbors in today’s story, we do not like uncertainty, either. Uncertainty makes us anxious, and anxiety does all sorts of difficult things to us: to our minds, bodies, relationships. And so, we try to push it all away.

The man’s neighbors take him to the Pharisees: the more educated ones. Surely, they will sort it all out, offer some firm, concrete answers they can stand on. But quickly, the Pharisees are frustrated, too. Some suggest Jesus cannot be doing God’s work because he is breaking the law, healing on the sabbath. Others want more information. “What do you say about the one who caused you to see?” they ask the man.

He replies with what he has experienced firsthand. “He put mud on my eyes, I washed, and now I see. Maybe he is a prophet,” he supposes.

That really needles the Pharisees, and after a little more back-and-forth, they issue their conclusion: “We know this man is a sinner.”

“I don’t know about that,” the man says. “One thing I do know: I was blind and now I see.”

In response, the Pharisees kick him out of town—the only “community” he has ever known. But guess who is there to welcome him. Jesus, of course: the good shepherd, who seeks and welcomes all the lost, the last, the left-out. Jesus not only heals but also finds, welcomes, and affirms. And perhaps for the first time in his life, this man who has been known only by his blindness, is welcomed into a community of care.

That is the real power—the miracle—of this story. This man—judged all his life to be a sinner, a “less-than,” rejected even by his own family—reduced and ridiculed by those who are

supposed to be welcoming him—finally finds more than healing. He finds grace and welcome and love in the beloved community Jesus is building.

That is the one thing I know this morning, in this season in which so much is unknown: Jesus' beloved community still is being born.

I do not know how long the spread of this virus is going to last. I do not know what its impact will be: on lives or the healthcare system, the economy, each of us. I do not know how much worse it will get before it gets better. But this one thing I do know: whatever lies ahead, God is in it. And we are in this thing together.

And so, even this present moment can be for us a sacred opportunity: to be church, beloved community, offering grace and welcome to one another and our neighbors; to reach out in the ways we can, bearing witness to God's love throughout our community; and to receive this moment—stepping out of old routines—as a gift and opportunity to pause and reflect and reassess those routines and the ways we have become accustomed to using time.

There is so much we do not know. But this we do know: God still is about the work of healing, welcoming, loving—making all things new. And we are invited to be a part of it. Thanks be to God. Amen.