

Sermon March 26, 2017 "Disturbances" John 9:1-41 Psalm 46

The reading we heard from John's gospel lets us see a lot of folks being disturbed. Jesus' disciples saw a man who had been born blind and asked Jesus the age-old question, "Why was that man born blind? Was it his sin or the sin of his parents that caused his blindness?"

This question continues to challenge and disturb us, even in this day of genetic manipulation and sophisticated mapping. Whether we can explain the physiological reasons or not, we are nevertheless disturbed by the unfairness of life. Why do some folks have to bear physical deformity or infirmity while others seemingly dance into their 80's and 90's reveling in good health? Why do so many children in our world suffer? Why do the big-time swindlers seem to be able to stay out of jail and dictate their own terms while small-time criminals are immediately thrown into jail? And that most personal of questions, "What did I do to deserve this illness or loss?"

In our reading, Jesus was asked one of the hard life-questions of the day.

His answer: "The man's blindness was not caused by either his or his parents' sin; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him." (John 9:3) Jesus then put a mixture of spit and dirt on the man's eyes and told him to go wash. Before the man could do so, Jesus had moved on... but the man became able to see.

This certainly created a disturbance, especially since it happened on a Sabbath, when faithful Jews were not supposed to lift a finger to do any work. To heal somebody, the religious authorities believed, was to work. So instead of the religious big-wigs praising God and giving thanks that the man could see, they cross-examined the healed man. "Who did this? Where did he come from? How did he heal you? Where did he go?" The healed man could not answer, because he did not know. All he knew about Jesus was that Jesus had given him sight.

Retired United Methodist Bishop William Willimon tells about a friend of his, a pastor, who years ago went through a very difficult experience at his church. The furnace at the parsonage had malfunctioned.. Someone had checked it out and declared it to be in good order. It turns out it was not.

In Willimon's words: "One Saturday in January, my friend awoke early and tried to get out of bed. He could not get fully awake. He thought he was simply tired from the night before, so he went back to sleep. He awoke later and, in a stupor, looked at the alarm clock. It was almost noon! He tried to get out of bed. His head was throbbing, and he could not move. He fell back into bed. At that moment he saw a small child, a little girl, dressed in white. 'How did you get in here?' he heard himself ask. 'What is a child doing in my house?' The little girl gestured toward him, pointed to the door. She said something to him like, 'You must get up and get out, or you will never get out.'

"He struggled out of bed at her urging, crawled through the bedroom door and out of the house,

collapsing on the front steps. The child was gone.

“Heating experts were called. The house was full of carbon monoxide.... Now (continues Willimon), as pastor, a theologian, my friend is not given to flights of fancy. He confided to me, ‘If I believed in angels, I would say that God sent an angel over to warn me of the danger; I cannot explain this in any other way.’

“There was no better explanation for his experience. But knowing how skeptical folks can be, I warned my friend to be careful to whom he told this story! His response: ‘All I know is, a few minutes more, and I would have been dead.’” (from *Pulpit Resource*, vol. 33, no. 1, pp 42-43, changed a bit by fte)

“All I know is that I was blind, but now I can see.”

What do *we* know? How have we noticed God at work in our lives? ...

Throughout the Bible and certainly in our lives, it would seem that God is noticed best in times of disturbance. And God is always MORE, always working beyond our narrow definitions and preconceptions of what is possible or allowable. In the midst of the most difficult disturbances of our lives, God can bring us something new, so that we see things in a new way.

Several Jewish cemeteries were horribly vandalized recently. Muslims stepped forward with donations and hard work to help repair them. The Jews who were helped began to see the Muslims in a different light.

A man always talked about homosexuals in a derogatory way, until he and his wife needed help and his gay neighbors took them under their wing and became their friends and caregivers.

God can help our eyes see more through any kind of disturbance, and we become less blind.

A rabbi once gathered together his students and asked them, “How do we know the exact moment when night ends and day begins?” One student suggested, “It’s when, standing some distance away, a sheep can be distinguished from a dog,” Another said, “It’s when you can tell an olive tree from a fig tree.” And the rabbi said, “When a stranger approaches, and we think of him as our brother, that is the moment when night ends and day begins.” (Paulo Coelho)

Some of you have heard me share how the late Michael Yaconelli told about a man who was a recent convert to Christianity. The man was approached by an unbelieving friend who said, “So, you have been converted to Christ, have you? You must know a lot about him. Tell me, in what country was he born?” The man answered, “I don’t know.”

“When did he die?” “I do not know.”

“How old was he when he died?” “I don’t know.”

“How many sermons did he write?” “I have no idea.”

“Well, for a man who claims to be a follower, you certainly don’t know much about this Jesus, do you?”

“You are right, I don’t know all that much about him. BUT THIS I DO KNOW: Three years ago I was a drunk, I was in debt, my family was falling apart and they dreaded the sight of me. Now I go to AA instead of to the bar, I have paid off all my debts, my home is loving, and my children are happy to see me when I walk through the door. All this Jesus Christ has done for me! I was lost, and now I am found. Now I can see that God is with me, that God loves me and calls me to live a life of sobriety and love. Now I can live. That’s all I know, but it all came about when Jesus Christ forgave me of my sins and healed me so I could live.” (*Messy Spirituality*, Michael Yaconelli, pp. 69-70)

There are lots of disturbances in our world right now. The economy seems better but is still uncertain, international relations challenge us, political bickering discourages us, and rampant greed threatens to undo us. A lot of life disturbs us, because too much does not fit with our world view or the way we have found some measure of security and comfort over the years. In the midst of it all, we would do well to remember the Psalm we shared today (46), which promises us that God is our help no matter how tumultuous our world becomes or how unstable our own lives seem; and also the gospel lesson, which would warn us that we need to make sure that we are not so caught up in our own preconceptions that we cannot see what God is doing in our world and our lives today. We must ask God to help us see in the very things that disturb us opportunities to recognize God at work, even in ways that surprise us. And we must dare to trust that even the toughest time is an opportunity to give God thanks and praise. It’s one thing to thank God when our plates and refrigerators and bank accounts have enough; it is an even larger thing to thank God when the meal is scant and the next meal uncertain. (pause)

In the face of whatever causes each of us to cry out, “Why, Lord?” Jesus is surely speaking to us, “Your life today is an opportunity for God’s power and love to be revealed to you and in you.”

May life today and the Word of God disturb us all enough to lead us into a more fervent relationship with God and into a new life in Jesus Christ. That’s what we’re offered. Thank God! Amen.