

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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My dad is now retired, but he spent most of his career as a law professor with a particularly dry sense of humor. And I remember one particular day, he came home from work looking exhausted. I asked him what was wrong, and he explained that he'd had a tough class, and then he said, "You know, they say there's no such thing as a stupid question... But some get pretty close!"

I was laughing and thinking of his words this week as I looked at our Gospel lesson, because the disciples' question today is what I would consider "pretty close."

We hear that Jesus is walking along and sees a man blind from birth and the disciples first reaction is to turn to Jesus and ask "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

Yeesh! This Lenten season, we've been doing a sermon series focused on questions. And each week we've had a different thoughtful question to consider – questions like "Who will we listen to?" and "How do we begin again?" The point of this series has been to see what these questions can reveal to us about God, about the world, about ourselves. And this question too, no matter how awful, also reveals something. It reveals the assumptions the disciples carried about people with disabilities, assumptions that prevented them from seeing the man's full humanity. And I think to dive

deeper into this question, and to understand how radical Jesus' response is, it's helpful to look at this story through the lens of three different models of disability.

The first is what's called the moral model. The moral model views disability as a result of sin, as an individual problem that's proof of a person's moral failing. It turns disability into a punishment that God doles out on those who deserve it.

And the second is called the medical model. The medical model also views disability as an individual problem, an impairment that should be treated or cured through medical means. And to be clear – this isn't all bad, after all medicine is incredibly important! But the medical model also suggests that disabled people are somehow not whole as they are, that only through being cured can they attain wholeness.

We see both of these models show up repeatedly throughout our Gospel story today. We see the moral model at work when the disciples, upon seeing the blind man, immediately assume that he or his parents have to have sinned. We see the medical model reflected in the fact that this passage is usually interpreted as a miracle story about curing blindness, a story where the blind man is only made whole after Jesus cures him, when the text actually presents a much more complicated reality. We see the moral model again when, after the man testifies about Jesus, the Pharisees drive him out, saying "You were born entirely in sin, and are you trying to teach us?" We see the medical model in the way that the man's neighbors care more about

how he was healed than about why he was forced to live as a beggar in the first place.

Both of these models can lead to societal shame and exclusion because they view disability as an individual problem. And as much as we might look at the disciples and Pharisees in this story and be horrified by their actions, I think we often have the same assumptions. We rush to make assumptions about individuals, because it's more comfortable than acknowledging that we too might be vulnerable within the same systems. It's easier to think of disability as an isolated problem than to acknowledge that the majority of us will develop a disability at some point in our lives. When we see disability only through the lens of individual fault or cure, we miss the bigger truth that Jesus is calling us toward in this Gospel story.

The third model of disability—called the social model—can help reveal this truth. The social model sees disability not as the fault of an individual person, but as the result of systemic barriers. It shifts our perspective from “fixing” a person to challenging the systems that exclude them.

When we view it through this lens, the story starts to look entirely different. Suddenly the issue isn't that the man is blind. The real issue is that society has pushed him to the margins, that the only way he can survive is through begging. The real issue is that no one believes him when he tells his story. The real issue is that people ask his parents to speak for him, as if he's incapable of speaking for himself.

And into that world of assumptions and exclusion, Jesus issues two radical statements of grace and truth. First he says "Neither this man nor his parents sinned." He utterly rejects the way the world has tied disability and sin together, completely overturning the idea that disability would ever be a punishment or a moral failure.

And then he says "He was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him." Now at first glance, this line feels pretty gross, because many people have interpreted the phrase "God's works" here to be referring to Jesus's healing. This interpretation reinforces the medical model, naming blindness as a brokenness that needed to be healed by Jesus in order to restore the man to wholeness.

But what if the phrase "God's works" in this verse instead refers to the image of God which has been in this man from the moment of his birth? What if God's works existed in this man long before Jesus came and healed him? If we look at Jesus' statement through the social model of disability, we can see that what had prevented God's work from being revealed in the man wasn't the fact that he was blind and needed to be healed, it was the fact that society was so focused on his blindness, they couldn't see his humanity. They looked at the man and saw only his blindness, but Jesus looked at him and saw a beloved child of God. They looked at the man and saw only his disability, but Jesus looked at him and saw someone whose very body revealed the image of God.

These two statements are incredible, life-giving good news to those of us who are disabled. In a world that constantly names disabled people as

broken or less than whole, Jesus says “you are whole, just as you are.” In a world that constantly uplifts certain bodies as ideal, Jesus looks at disabled people and says “you, too, were made in the image of God.” And in a world that often views disability as an individual problem, this Gospel issues a call for us to use better models and ask better questions, to throw away questions like “Who sinned?” and instead ask “What barriers in society prevented the blind man from getting what he needed to flourish, just as he was?”

And the beautiful irony of this story, of course, is that the man who was born blind ultimately sees Jesus more clearly than anyone else in the story. And the Pharisees—though physically capable of seeing—are unable to recognize the truth about Jesus because they are so entrenched in their own assumptions. This serves as a powerful reminder that people with disabilities are not just passive receivers, as society often treats them, but have meaningful knowledge and gifts to offer all on their own, knowledge and gifts that the rest of the body of Christ needs in order for all of us to flourish.

This Gospel story has always resonated deeply with me, because I understand what it feels like to be judged only by the moral and medical model. Between finishing college and starting seminary I became disabled when I was diagnosed with a rare neurological disorder called Idiopathic Hypersomnia, which means that, among other things, I live with an extreme level of sleepiness and fatigue no matter how much I sleep at night. And as you can imagine, this made seminary hard. I had always loved school, and yet suddenly I was falling asleep in class, or struggling to stay awake long enough to finish papers. And as I struggled, I began to internalize the assumptions that our society teaches us about disability. Part of me saw

myself through the moral model: I blamed myself, wondering what I had done to cause this. Part of me saw myself through the medical model: as I tried treatment after treatment – some of which helped, but none of which cured me – I kept thinking that I had to find a cure, because surely I couldn't live like this forever. And along with all of this came a deep sense of grief – grief about how the world seemed to interact with me differently than before I was disabled, grief about how I couldn't imagine how I could be a good pastor. I remember wondering if anyone really saw *me*, or if they just saw my disability.

But one day, my best friend from seminary Lyndsay sat me down after I had a particularly hard week and said something I will never forget. She said “Sarah, I see you. I see you and I know that the church needs you, just as you are. The world and the church may not be set up in ways that make things easy for you, but that's the system's fault, not yours. And God calls us to build better systems.”

In that moment, something shifted for me. I realized what the man in our Gospel today knew: I had not sinned. I was not broken. And though my disability has brought many challenges, it doesn't erase my gifts, gifts that I can use to build better systems.

This is what Jesus reveals to us in this story: people with disabilities are not theological object lessons or problems to be solved. They are beloved children of God, created in the image of God, with gifts and knowledge that enrich the entire community. And part of being the church is learning to recognize that truth. When we make our spaces accessible, when we not

only invite people with disabilities but show that they are needed and loved, we build up the body of Christ in a way that makes flourishing more accessible for everyone.

In just two short months, we will officially be ADA accessible. And over the next few months the Church Council is launching an Accessibility Task Force to help this community think even more expansively about what welcome can look like for people with disabilities. The incredible thing is that this congregation is already hard at work following Jesus' call in this Gospel. So as we move into this next chapter, may we remember that this story isn't really about blindness being cured, but about Jesus teaching an entire community of people how to see. It's about Christ continuing to invite us, across the ages, to ask better questions—questions that expose the assumptions we carry, questions that reveal the image of God in every person, and questions that help us build up a body of Christ where everyone can thrive. **Amen.**