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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
Fourth Sunday in Lent
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Lectionary Year A: John 9:1-41

The idea of illness or disability as a punishment for sin is an old one, and it is one that people can easily slip back into during the outbreak of a pandemic. What makes this so easy is our engrained sense of actions leading to consequences; in other words, if you do "x," then "y" will happen to you. If any of you had the good fortune of studying any of the social or health sciences, you would have heard this oft-repeated maxim that still holds water today: "Correlation does not imply causation." If, for example, I keep a record of all the days I misplace my cell phone, and discover that Tuesday is the day on which I most frequently misplace it, may I conclude that there is something about Tuesday that causes this?

No!

In fact, if I were to attempt to establish anything regarding my proclivity for misplacing my cell phone, I would have to undertake a much more rigorous analysis of it, looking at all kinds of different variables that could possibly contribute to the phenomenon. So rigorous are people in the social and health sciences that they took years to establish the link between smoking and lung cancer -- a link that is obvious today -- but their rigor only serves to make their conclusions all the more authoritative.

Looking back through history, we have the scientific method to thank for this, without which we would probably be still employing old-fashioned "trial and error," where (in medicine, for example), if the patient survives the treatment,

it is deemed a success, and if the patient dies, it is not. Trial and error, depending on statistical probability, could conceivably take millions of years to discover basic treatments that we take for granted today. And for those of you who don't like the sight of blood, be thankful that modern medicine did away with bloodletting with exception of a very few cases. Yet, bloodletting can still give us a good chuckle whenever the rerun of Saturday Night Live rolls around with Steve Martin's unforgettable "Theodoric of York, Medieval Barber."

I'll never forget Theodoric saying to the drunkard, played by John Belushi, "Well, you'll feel a lot better after a good bleeding," to which the drunkard replies, "But I'm bleeding already." Condescendingly, Theodoric asks him, "Say, who's the barber here?"

And, despite numerous complaints that his treatments are ineffective or lethal, Theodoric arrogantly persists. What a character!

When we look back to this morning's Gospel text, we acknowledge, too, that we are looking back into a prescientific world, where the whole relationship of correlation to causation obviously wasn't worked out. Thus, the questions asked and the issues raised shouldn't be too surprising. Right off the bat, we get this question from the disciples: "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (John 9:2b). Again, the assumption is that illness or disability is a punishment for sin -- an assumption that was widespread in the ancient world. But Jesus doesn't exactly go the scientific route, either; he answers, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him" (John 9:3). This, of course, foreshadows "God's works" of healing that are about to take place in the blind man,

I have always found the treatment that follows to be rather gross. Even the

spit of Jesus himself might make me go, "Eeewww." But, if I were blind, I might also be willing to try something unorthodox. This text also comes to us at a time when we're hypersensitive to things like pathogens and disease transmission, so we're probably not hearing it as innocently as we should. Yet I can hear all kinds of people claiming that, since he was the Son of God, Jesus could have no germs, which, in itself, is a heretical notion!

Jesus was also human...I'll leave it at that.

But before we get lost in the minutiae, we need to remember the point of this story, which is how God's works are manifested in acts such as Jesus restoring the sight of the blind man. We may be reminded of when John the Baptist was in prison and of how John sent messengers to Jesus to see if he was "the one" (Luke 7:20b); remember what Jesus says to them, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard; the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them" (Luke 7:22). What we read in this morning's Gospel text is actually the heart of Jesus' earthly ministry; here, he is doing that which is at the top of the list he has for John the Baptist's messengers...the blind receive their sight!

But this story has its antagonists, too. As it turns out, the Pharisees are not convinced that Jesus is "the one." They accuse him of not observing the Sabbath and ask, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" (John 9:16). (There's another interesting logical leap in the relationship of correlation to causation.) After going to both the blind man and the blind man's parents and being utterly unsatisfied with everything they're told they arrive at an impasse, at which the formerly blind man seems to lose his patience once and for all. He says, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes

from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing" (John 9:30-33).

The formerly blind man is convinced that Jesus is an obedient and good man, which doesn't go over very well, because the Pharisees are still convinced that he had been born in sin (John 9:34). To put it plainly, we're not making a lot of progress here! At this point, I wonder if Jesus hasn't given up on the Pharisees, though; listen to the conclusion that Jesus comes to, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind" (John 9:39). This almost sounds like Jesus is saying, "I'd sooner restore the sight of humble blind people than sit around blessing the faint praises of hypocrites; in fact, I'd pluck out their eyes, if given the chance!"

Also, the posture of humility here seems to be that of admitting to one's blindness; thus, we shift from a literal to a figurative "blindness." As to what sorts of things we might imply from that, we could point to arrogance, ignorance, and hypocrisy, which would be consistent with traits Jesus finds in the Pharisees. And though the Pharisees know and observe the Law very well, that is still not evidence that they truly "see." It is not sufficient, so might Jesus say, to just "go through the motions," and look like a righteous person when evil still lurks in the heart. When we come to the end of this service of Morning Prayer, we will say together these words: "And, we pray, give us such an awareness of your mercies, that with truly thankful hearts we may show forth your praise, not only with our lips, but in our lives..." (BCP, p. 101). In light of this morning's Gospel text, it would seem that followers of Jesus are

called to go above and beyond the mere outward appearance of piety. The "lip service" of doing everything correctly is woefully inadequate when compared to how we're called to live our lives. And that's what the Pharisees often didn't seem to "get."

As for the formerly blind man, a transformation occurred in him not only when his sight was restored, but also when he said to Jesus, "Lord, I believe" (John 9:38a). Theologically speaking, this is the most important transformation of all, for we do not look to our faith to fix things or relieve minor aches and pains; rather, our faith is to so re-orient our heart, mind, and soul to Jesus that we see him as the Source of our life, light, sight, and hope. As we are so re-oriented, may we see accordingly -- not with petty views of illness or disability as a punishment for sin, to name one example, but with glorious visions of our Lord healing hearts, minds, and souls as well as bodies. During this pandemic, let us not prevent the spread of Coronavirus at the cost of diseased hearts, minds, and souls. And let us not -- most of all -- fall into the easy trap of seeing this mess as a punishment for sin, whatever the sin may be. Jesus would have nothing of the sort, nor should we!

Lastly, let us look to our God, remembering the words from Lamentations, chapter 3, as the One who "does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone" (3:33). If there's anyone to blame now, it certainly isn't a God with an attitude problem, for such a God does not exist. To the contrary, may we be so aware of our abundantly merciful and steadfast God that our wills conform to his, so that we will one day realize, with his help, the healing of hearts, minds, souls, and bodies. Amen.