

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH  
FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT  
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON  
“THE MYSTERY OF SUFFERING”  
April 3, 2011  
John 9:1-41  
ALL SERVICES**

The mystery of suffering can never be fully explained or understood. Theologians and philosophers have certainly tried. But why do people suffer? The question suggests that all suffering has a cause. Even if all suffering has a cause, said Jesus, we may never know the cause. Jesus was more concerned with finding a purpose in someone's suffering. He taught that we can find purpose in suffering by bearing it in faith and alleviating it through love.

The blind man in this episode is less to be pitied than his parents and the Pharisees. He was blind to the world around him. They were blind to the world within. Their fear and their pride kept them from seeing that the kingdom of God is within.

The Feast of the Tabernacles is the fall festival of the Jews, not unlike Thanksgiving. It is celebrated by families adding a tent or booth onto their homes, commemorating the wilderness wanderings when their forebears lived in tents. It is the last of the three great Jewish festivals and in Jesus' time involved a ceremony of lights. Giant candlesticks were erected in the temple's Court of the Women. The light was so bright that every courtyard in Jerusalem was said to be illumined. On this occasion Jesus declared: *“I am the light of the world. Those who follow me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”* (John 8:12)

A clear indication of the human tendency to avoid responsibility is what has come to be called **“the blame game.”** Whatever else we must endure, we cannot bear to be wrong. Therefore, when something bad happens, rather than examining our own possible culpability, we almost instinctively look for someone to blame. The worst kind of tragedy can be explained, and ultimately filed away, if someone can be blamed for it. Blaming is for many a way of avoiding self-knowledge.

Today's Gospel lesson centers on a man who was blind from birth. It was believed that the cause of human suffering was sin. Someone who was born with an affliction, therefore, presented a problem. The rabbis handled it in one of two ways: either the person's parents sinned, or the person sinned in the mother's womb. When Jesus found the man born blind, the disciples asked him who was to blame for it. Jesus responded by saying neither was responsible, but that the man's blindness was an opportunity for the works of God to be seen.

Jesus' response may have had more than one meaning. First, since Jesus was clearly saying to his disciples that assessing blame for this man's blindness was inappropriate, isn't it possible that he was also saying that sin is not the only cause of suffering? Second, was Jesus suggesting to his disciples that fixing or locating blame was not the solution to every problem? The "**blame game**" remains a way of closing our eyes to the truth both about others and about ourselves.

Forty-five million people in the world are blind. The leading causes of blindness are age-related conditions (such as cataract, glaucoma, and macular degeneration) and uncontrolled diabetes. These causes are increasing. Blindness caused by infection, however, is decreasing. The World Health Organization estimates that three-fourths of all blindness can be prevented or treated. There is ever-increasing hope for those who suffer from one of humankind's most tragic plights.

On the other hand, physical blindness may not be the worst form of blindness. It is largely a practical problem. The eyes and the brain both work together to create sight. Different parts of the eye function in unison to focus on light and images. The eyes then use special nerves to send what you see to your brain, and the brain processes and recognizes what you are seeing. All this happens almost instantly. When this marvelous system fails, however, all is not lost. With the loss of sight the other senses - - touch, hearing, smell, taste - - do their best to compensate. Today, in addition to Braille, there are devices that read out loud what is written on a page. With special equipment the sightless person can read almost anything. The blind, far from being denied self-realization, often out-achieve the sighted. They have excelled in music, the arts, and athletics. Some of the noblest and most gifted individuals in history were blind. Many of them saw things the rest of us have never seen.

Physical blindness, in many cases, is less serious and less of a handicap than the willful blindness of those who will not see the truth. Physical blindness does not

necessarily limit a person's spiritual horizons or imagination or aspirations. But the blindness of ignorance, of bias, and of narcissism can be intractable and permanent without some kind of inner transformation. There are none so blind as those who will not see. This is a complex issue, and it is not simply a matter of spiritual sight or spiritual blindness. All of us, even the most open-minded of us, have blind spots, areas where we cannot or will not see objectively. Faithful followers of Christ must continually pray for clearer vision, and for a willingness to see the truth.

Jesus healed the man who was born blind. What followed, however, was a series of complications that almost drove the poor man out of his mind! Those who knew him would not believe he was the same person. Those who did not know him would not believe he had really been blind. And even his parents were afraid to vouch for him. In the end, when the authorities had cast the poor man out, Jesus found him and blessed his faith. ***“For judgment I have come into the world,”*** said Jesus, ***“that those who are blind may see, and those who (claim to) see may become blind.”***

This entire episode rests on Jesus' claim to be ***“the light of the world.”*** Christ's light does indeed reveal the truth to those who genuinely seek the truth, and Christ's light exposes the blindness of those who claim to possess the truth. Jesus makes this clear in his final words to the Pharisees, the blind ones who cannot see their own blindness!

Sight, whether physical or spiritual, is a gift from God. Far from condemning the blind to remain in their condition, Jesus takes the initiative in giving both physical and spiritual illumination to a helpless victim who cannot escape the darkness through his own efforts. The gift of sight is still available to those who confess their blindness and receive the true light, the Light of the world.

The Serenity Prayer has become one of the best-known, most-recited prayers in the world. The mystery of its origin may have been solved in a recent book by the daughter of theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. But it hardly affects the redemptive usefulness and power of the prayer. It expresses the essence of Jesus' approach to suffering. ***“God, grant me serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.”***

If Christ has opened your eyes to his truth and you are now willing to do what pleases God I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.