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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Fourth Sunday in Lent (Series A)

March 30, 2014

Text: John 9:1–7, 13–17, 34–39

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

One of the most common arguments atheists have used over the past 300 years is the problem of evil. If God is good and loving, as you Christians say, and if God is all-powerful, as you Christians say, then why does this good, loving, all-powerful God allow so much evil in the world? If you like fancy sounding words, it's the question of theodicy. Popular atheist writers of today continue to use the problem of evil in their various attempts to cower Christians, or any theist for that matter, into silence and submission.

Today's gospel reading addresses the question of evil. Jesus and His disciples are traveling and they come across a man born blind. The disciples ask Jesus, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (vs. 2). What underlies the disciples' question is an implicit assumption that evil happens as a direct result of evil actions. If evil action A happens it will produce evil consequence B.

Jesus rejects this cause and effect assumption out-of-hand. Things don't necessarily work that way. Jesus doesn't explain why bad things happen; at least, not with a nice, tight philosophical answer. Our Lord's answer to evil comes through different means: suffering, death, and resurrection. Good Friday and Easter and the resurrection on the Last Day are God's divine answer to the problem of evil.

In the meantime, the Lord presses evil into the service of good. That's the startling conclusion Jesus gives in His teaching. Look at vs. 3, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him." In other words, forget about that cause and effect thinking about sin and evil. But God's gracious work will be manifested through the evil of congenital blindness.

Then Jesus does the unexpected. After declaring that He is the light of the world (vs. 5), Jesus takes some dirt, spits in it, and kneads it into mud. In the beginning, God created Adam from the dust of the ground. Now, God the Son takes the same substance from which man came and creates two perfectly seeing eyes. The blind man

is told to wash in the pool Siloam. John rather tersely states, “So he went and washed and came back seeing” (vs. 7). And there’s the miracle! The light of the world has dispelled the darkness of this man’s blindness! The work of God was manifested through this man’s blindness. Evil was pressed into holy service.

One can’t help but wonder if the apostle Paul had this incident in mind when he wrote those famous words in Romans 8:28, “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.” Even blindness, in the hands of Jesus, is worked for good. Again, it’s not the nice and tidy philosophical answer that people are expecting; it’s even better, more mysterious and transcendent.

But there is something strange about today’s text. The light of the world has dispelled the darkness of this man’s blindness and nobody rejoices. Doesn’t that seem odd? Instead, there’s an investigation as if a crime had been committed.

The Pharisees are called in according to vs. 13–17 in large part because the healing was performed on the Sabbath (vs. 14). The Pharisees conclude that Jesus and His miracle could not have been from God “for he does not keep the Sabbath” (vs. 16). Doesn’t that leave you scratching your head in sheer astonishment? Jesus heals a man born blind and the Pharisees begrudge that fact and start quibbling about whether or not it’s proper to heal on the Sabbath. This is what legalistic man-made religion will give you!!

Lest we think this doesn’t apply to what we typically think of spiritual things, all you need do is begin talking about the effective, saving power of God’s Word and His Sacraments. Just watch and see what happens. The clearest, most simple reading of the Bible is that “you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God” (I Peter 1:23). Regarding the Sacraments, a simple reading of the Bible says Baptism is a washing with water for the forgiveness of sins, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). Regarding the Lord’s Supper God’s Word simply declares that the bread and wine are the body and blood of Jesus given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.

Take any of these three examples to your next morning coffee hour at the restaurant and see what’ll happen. But how can one be born again by grace alone without me

doing something. Mustn't I at least accept it or ask for it? Baptism? Surely it's just a ritual pointing to what God has already done. It's good but not necessary. The Lord's Supper? Body and blood in bread and wine? That's not possible. It must only represent Jesus' body and blood. And as far as forgiveness goes, surely God doesn't give that away so freely in words, water, bread and wine without some action on my part – my prayer, my contrition, my desperate longing for it. It can't be that free. The works of God's grace are on open display! The light of the world is shining. And people want to quibble, debate, and explain it all away.

But a distinction must be made between questions coming from a desire to deny the promises of God and questions that come from faith seeking greater understanding. When Jesus asked the blind man who now sees if he believes in the Son of Man, he responded with a question, "Who is he that I might believe?" (vs. 36) This is faith seeking understanding not doubt seeking to destroy.

The questions and doubts surrounding the blind man now seeing and walking around town continue. The parents are interrogated in vs. 18–23. That's gets them nowhere. So the Pharisees question the blind man who now sees a second time in vs. 24–34. He's getting frustrated by all this. The works of God are on display and they only thing people can do is fuss about it. The one born blind but now sees finally speaks that which should have been most obvious. Hear his reply the investigation and the workings of man-made religions:

Why, this is an amazing 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 if anyone is a worshiper of God and does his will, God listens to him. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing" (vs. 30–33).

How does man-made religion respond to such clear-headed thinking? It casts the healed man out of the synagogue. He went from an object of pity to an object of scorn. The man born blind is literally persecuted because of Jesus. Can God work something good from that evil?

In vs. 35 our Lord seeks out the blind man who now sees; Jesus is still the Savior who seeks and finds the lost. Now we finally understand why Jesus did what He did. Our Lord takes the blind man (and us) beyond the physical healing to the more important reality of what it pointed to – faith, life, salvation, the light of God seen in Jesus. The

blind man falls to Jesus' feet in worship and joyful confession, "Lord, I believe" (vs. 38) you are the Son of Man. This is the first mention of worship, praise, and thanksgiving in this entire chapter!! The blind man sees the truth, the truth that is Jesus, the Son of Man come to do the works of God!

We too are called to see and declare the truth. As redeemed saints of Christ, we walk in His light and bear the fruit of light and truth. The reign of darkness is ended for we know that God works all things for good. Such a confession of faith is nothing more than the application of Good Friday and Easter to our everyday lives. Through the evil of Good Friday – the only sinless Man that was ever born was killed – the greatest good was accomplished as the world's sins were paid for. The Lord's Easter resurrection revealed to all creation that God does indeed work all things for good for those who love Him.

In baptism, you are connected to the saving work of Jesus. In today's Supper, the highest good of being forgiven and brought into fellowship with Jesus and His Church is accomplished. The works of God are on display in our midst. We Christians don't ignore the evil and suffering of the world; this is no land of make believe. Through faith founded upon the death and resurrection of God's Son, we see the works of God being manifested in our world. And through that same faith in Jesus, we see the hope of the world to come when evil will finally and ultimately be locked away forever.

God's answer to the problem of evil is Jesus, crucified, resurrected, and coming again on the Last Day. Until then, the works of God continue to be manifested. Evil is overcome with good. The Light of the world pierces the darkness and shines His bright beams into each and every situation.

The light of Jesus shine upon each of you...

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.