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“Changing Family Trajectories”

Sermon Series: *Clean Slate* No. 3

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John 9:1-11

1 As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. 2 His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

3 “Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus, “but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him. 4 As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. 5 While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.”

6 After saying this, he spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man’s eyes. 7 “Go,” he told him, “wash in the Pool of Siloam” (this word means “Sent”). So the man went and washed, and came home seeing.

8 His neighbors and those who had formerly seen him begging asked, “Isn’t this the same man who used to sit and beg?” 9 Some claimed that he was.

Others said, “No, he only looks like him.”

But he himself insisted, “I am the man.”

10 “How then were your eyes opened?” they asked.

11 He replied, “The man they call Jesus made some mud and put it on my eyes. He told me to go to Siloam and wash. So I went and washed, and then I could see.”

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The gospel of John, chapter 9 is our text for today...if you’d care to take a Bible and turn back there. John chapter 9.

It’s been five or six years ago now that I first heard the term, “adulging.” I don’t know if it’s been officially accepted as a “real word” yet...I don’t even know who’s in charge of that, but my spell checker still underlines it in red, so I’m guessing not.

Still...the concept itself is real. It used to be called simply, “growing up,” or, “taking responsibility,” or, “reaching maturity,” and a **big** part of that was learning, usually from an unpleasant experience, the fundamental lesson that ***life is not fair***.

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When we’re young and idealistic, we want to believe in some absolute fairness about life.

How many parents or grandparents or teachers have heard young, and maybe not so young, children, in that whiny voice they sometimes have, cry out, *“but that’s not fair!”*

It’s only when we “adult” successfully...when we grow up in mind and emotion...that we *realize*...and actually come to *appreciate* the fact that life is about more than fairness and justice.

When we “adult,” we learn that life also includes mercy.

Ironically, it’s actually mercy that sometimes throws an unwelcome wrench into our conceptions of fairness or justice.

When two people do not get the same punishment for the same sin...or crime; a traffic violation, for example. When *we* get a *ticket* for the *same infraction* for which *another* receives a *warning*– we claim injustice...unfairness!

*But*...when *we’re* the one who gets the *warning* and the *other* gets the *ticket*...well...that’s different, isn’t it? That’s mercy. No complaints from us there.

What that means is...the issue of fairness is often only an issue if *we* stand to benefit...and it’s in this very way that maturity means getting past our own ego.

Maturity...“adulthood”...is realizing that the world does not revolve around us...which is part of accepting the fact that life, in a broken world like ours, is not always fair...and also, even more importantly, realizing that God does not exist to make the world fair for us.

“Life is not fair, and God’s reason for being is not to make life fair for us;” learning *that* is central to becoming an adult. In fact, once a person realizes and embraces that, I’d guess they have about 90% of life figured out.

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Humanity in general, though, has *struggled* with grasping this, which is not surprising.

If the fall in Eden could be boiled down to one issue, it is that we humans have become the center of our universe. Fallen humanity now believes that *we*, and *not God*, are the focal point of existence, which explains the deep demand we have for fairness...as it applies to us.

We see this very struggle in the disciples’ response to this blind fellow here in John 9.

In a world of fairness, *someone* just *had* to be at fault for his condition, which is why they asked Jesus there in verse 2, *“Rabbi, who sinned – this guy or his parents?”*

This was the Jewish rationale of Jesus’ day: wherever there was *suffering*, there *had* to be *sin*.

There were actually several different ideas, in those days, that tried to explain “sin before birth,” which would have had to be the case here, since this fellow was *born* blind.

One was that God was sort of pre-emptively punishing the sin that He knew this man would commit later in his life.

Another was the belief that babies, before they are born, can think sinful thoughts.

Still another idea was of the pre-existence of the human soul...that souls existed before the world’s creation somewhere...where they waited to enter into a body, so it would

have been *there* that this “*person*” committed some sin that would cause him to be born blind.

You see the demand for fairness in all that?

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Beyond those, the only other option they had was to believe that this fellow’s *parents* must have sinned; an idea they took from passages like Exodus 20, verse 5, the second commandment, that says that though God blesses to a thousand generations those who *keep* His commandments, God lays the sins of parents upon their children to the third or fourth generation.

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Now of course, we don’t deny that this does happen.

If a man is a terrible father, for example...abusive and neglectful and dominating or whatever, his children will almost certainly suffer from both that poor behavior and example, which also gives them the potential to inflict pain on ones that come after them.

If a woman abuses her body while pregnant, that child will, more than likely, suffer because of her sin...her poor choices and carelessness.

This is simply the way God made the world to work. We are intertwined with one another in those ways and the effects of our sin are wider than we know.

But...is that true every time? Does fairness demand the incontestable formula that a certain sin be responsible for a certain suffering?

No...and that’s because of mercy. God’s mercy.

This is what Jesus declares here in verse 3: “*This blindness is not the result of either the sin of this man or his parents.*”

Hardships and suffering *do sometimes* come *generationally*, but *not always*...and that’s because sometimes there is fairness operating in our world and sometimes there is mercy.

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There was no suffering in the world before the fall, so sin, in *that* way, *is* the *reason* for *all* suffering.

And...actions always have consequences. Good things often come from good actions, and bad things often come from bad actions.

But that is not absolute. That’s not inevitable.

Sometimes kindness is met with rejection.

Sometimes criminals get away with their crimes.

We can’t always point to specific sins to explain specific sufferings. It’s not that simple. Like Tom Wright says, “the world is stranger and darker and more mysterious than that.”

In fact, the Bible tells us that there can be many reasons for specific sufferings.

The book of Job, for example, is an extended argument against this very sort of one-for-one, sin-for-suffering parity. Job's counselors insist that Job was suffering for a sin that he'd committed and that he needed to repent of. Job challenged their view and God supported Job.

In the New Testament, we're told that the Apostle Paul struggled with some sort of malady; "a thorn in the flesh" he calls it. Yet Paul concludes that it was there, not because of some sin of his, but so that God's power would overshadow Paul's own...so Paul could claim that it was **God's** power, not his, that accomplished amazing things.

We're not given a simple answer...Jesus here does not give us a simple answer as to why one person seems to experience justice and another mercy...because there is no simple answer to it...that we can understand in our limited conceptions, anyway.

All we know from Jesus here is that the presence of suffering in our lives does not necessarily mean the presence of some specific, personal sin.

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At the same time, regarding the issue of the sins of our family...our forebears...causing our affliction, we are given a firm word, not only from Jesus here, but also from the prophet Ezekiel.

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In Ezekiel's day, 600 years or so before Jesus, it was considered absolute that children would suffer for their parents' sin. A parable common in that day was, "***the fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge.***"<sup>1</sup>

Yet Ezekiel declares that, in the New Covenant, this idea is not valid. Ezekiel says, rather, that the one who sins...not the family, not the forebears, not the ancestors...those who commit the sin are the ones to bear it's eternal consequence.

This is the declaration...the announcement of individual accountability before God...with which Jesus agrees.

So what that meant for this blind man is that it was certainly **not** the sins of his family he was bearing in his blindness.

And...it was not his own.

If that were all that was said about it, we'd have to be content with that...but Jesus goes further and declares something very similar to that which the Apostle Paul concluded about his own sufferings. Paul says that, regardless of their reason for being, his suffering...his weakness would allow God to do something amazing through him.

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Now, let me say...this is **not** about the **sufferer** being **worthwhile only** as an **example**. God does not **use** people like that. That is not the way of love.

God does not intend for anyone to suffer. That was not part of His plan for His world.

¹ Ezekiel 18:2

But...due to his blindness, this man would be able to experience, himself...and then proclaim – as he absolutely does in the verses that follow...that an amazing act of divine mercy was worked in His life.

And...it was a mercy that has worked on in our world.

It's no coincidence that, what God did for this fellow...we're reading about it today...2000 years later...as have many others in ages past. What Jesus did was a mercy that, in it's retelling, has brought countless people faith and hope and boldness and courage.

This man's blindness wasn't because of his own sin or that of his family. But Jesus used it to display God's love and compassion...as well as His mercy and power.

And you see, being willing to accept that God always has more going on in our world, and in our own lives, than simple formulas can ever explain...that is "adulthood," maturing in faith.

God is always about more. He always has more going on than we can see with our eyes or perceive with our comprehension, which is but one of many reasons that God, and not any of us, is the centerpiece of the world.

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OK, so...what does this mean for us today regarding a clean slate? A new start?

Well, it means that, because of Jesus, there is far more than fairness or justice going on in our world. There is also mercy, and that mercy is available to us.

That means that we are not trapped by our own, or our families', pasts and sins and shortcomings.

It means that our future...what is written on our slates...is not determined by what other people have done. A clean slate before God is possible for us...no matter what our parents, or grandparents, or great-grandparents did.

You and I...we are not trapped in a world where our past sins, or the sins of other people, determine our destiny.

Will you see that? Will you believe that? Will you claim it as the truth of God for you?

That is how faith becomes mature.

You see, the "un-adulted," if you will...the immature and childish say, at every turn, "Pity me. Life has been unfair to me. I'm a victim!"

"Someone else has written on my slate and I can't erase it."

Now, I'm not saying people are not sometimes victims. Certainly and sadly, people **are** victimized in our world.

But in Jesus, we have the opportunity for mercy.

In Jesus, because He is forgiving of us, not only can we be forgiven, we can also forgive ourselves,

we can forgive those who've wronged us,

we can move past the effects of our own and others' sin committed against us,

and we can find real divine power for transformation.

All of that is part of the redemption Jesus came to bring.

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So why don't more embrace the healing...the freedom...that Jesus wants to give?

Ah...one reason is there is a certain ease and comfort in resting in one's victimhood.

There is a comfort in saying, "I just can't do anything about myself and my situation," and a lot of people choose to remain right there.

A lot of people in our society today don't want to hear that they can be different – that in Jesus they can rise above even long-established personal or family trajectories.

A lot of people in our society enjoy being victims and receiving the sympathy and excuses that "victim-ness" brings to their lives.

The fact is, our society...our government even...does many things to encourage victimhood with all it's programs that are available with little more than a person's claim.

Between the fall and our society, we are immersed in a culture that coddles victims, because, generally speaking, it does not believe that any sort of deep transformation is possible.

We're left to merely bear people along because, since we don't believe in God, we don't believe any real transforming power exists.

We've dismissed the idea of divine mercy, so we're left to just struggle along with fairness.

This is why it takes a certain maturity to accept the fact that, not only do we **not** have to be victims of our own past choices or the choices of others, but in fact Jesus calls us **out** of victimhood.

He calls us to higher ground.

All of us...every single person on earth...Jesus calls to a higher, better, freer and cleaner place than we occupy just now.

If we would just say yes to Him. No matter what our issue...**and**...no matter it's **cause** or **source**, we can become, just like this blind man became, a force for Christ...a living representative of mercy...to our world.

Because of God the Father's mercy...because Jesus came and died and was raised to life again...every one of us can be far more than passive participants in our circumstances.

Because of Jesus, the criminal can find a new ethic.

Because of Jesus, the victim of poor parenting can become a great person and parent.

Because of Jesus, the drunk can be sober, and the addict can be freed.

Because of Jesus, the liar can speak truth, and the profane can be pure.

The abused can be restored.

Because of Jesus, the trajectory...the aim...that path that maybe we, our or family, put us on in days past can be changed.

No matter the cause of the suffering in our lives, because of Jesus, the dirty slate can be made clean.

If we will.

If we will “adult” out of the victim mentality and give our situation to Jesus. He is the path out...He is the way...and the truth and the life.

Are you looking for a clean slate this morning...a way out of some sort of bondage?

Would you want to ask Jesus to give you a clean slate this morning?

He hopes you will.

Closing Prayer:

Closing Song: “All Your Anxiety – bring to the mercy seat leave it there.”

Closing Word:

Just before this healing, Jesus had just made the statement that He is the light of the world. Of course the Pharisees and others argued with Him, to the point of rising up against Him. They said His claims were baseless and could not be proven.

So then Jesus goes out and proves wrong them with this healing.

And Jesus still does this today...He redeems situations of hardship and suffering...He gives people new starts...clean slates...so others might know who He is.

This is the savior we follow and celebrate today.

Thanks for coming to worship. The Lord bless you and keep you.

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