

Healing Power
John 9:1-13, 28-41
April 3, 2011

I.

Most of us have heard various expressions of cheer and good will used in toasts. Bottoms up! To your health! Down the hatch! In today's Gospel Jesus sort of said, "Here's mud in your eye" as he mixed saliva with dirt to heal a blind man. Some scholars of words and phrases believe the reference to mud in our modern toast originates with this story in John's Gospel.

And this was a rather unusual way for Jesus to heal, wasn't it? In other parts of the Bible he simply proclaimed healing, or laid hands on someone, or anointed them with oil. So why did he anoint with mud in this situation?

The Bible does not answer that question. Some suggest it was connected to Jesus' instruction to the man to wash in the pool at Siloam. The theory could be that through God's power the healing waters washed away the mud and restored the man's sight just as our holy baptisms in water wash away the guilt of original sin and restore us.

In any event, however, this reading offers some useful perspectives on two important aspects of our faith. The first is how we understand God's presence in what seems to be the chances and uncertainties of life. The second is how turning to our Lord and Savior can help us through those uncertainties and heal us, certainly spiritually and sometimes physically.

II.

Let's begin with the divine providence of God as the all-powerful Creator. If God controls all things, we might wonder if God is responsible for bad things as well as good things. When things are not going well do we ask, "What did I do to deserve this?" Or, "Lord, why is this happening to me?" We probably have had those thoughts at one time or another.

And that way of thinking was inherent in the question that Jesus' disciples asked him at the beginning of today's reading. As they were walking along they saw a man blind from birth, and the disciples said, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

The disciples' question does not show much compassion for the man's plight, does it? Instead, they were more interested in how sin was responsible for his affliction. And implicit in their question was the idea that not only had someone sinned, but also that God had punished that sin by causing blindness.

This dualism of good and evil had developed among the Jews as they lived under foreign domination in the time before Jesus' birth. The law of Moses in the Book of Numbers says, "The Lord is slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished" (14:18). This idea also is in Exodus (20:5, 34:7) and Deuteronomy (5:9).

But what did Jesus say? He rejected both of his disciples' alternatives in favor of a third option. He said the blindness was not caused by anyone's sin, and was not punishment. Instead, it was an occasion for him to reveal God's mercy and compassion by restoring the man's sight.

That leads to an important part of our lives in faith. God does not cause bad things to happen, and through his grace he is able to redeem suffering and grief.

But it doesn't always happen that way, does it? What about the pain and suffering of natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina, or the recent tsunami in Japan. We know how they happened and can understand the scientific explanations for them. But do we think God caused them?

And what about tragedies with no explanation? How do we cope when a young child suddenly is taken from us? What about the young mother with incurable cancer? What do we think when a high school honor student becomes a victim of random violence? Did God do those things?

I believe that God did not want any of them to happen. And for an explanation we should begin at the beginning. You might have heard me say on other occasions what I'm about to say now.

Satan, not God, was the original culprit. Satan was a fallen angel who was created good, but rebelled against God and spread that rebellion to the world. Then Satan caused the fall of humanity when Adam and Eve were tempted to eat the forbidden fruit.

As a result, both humanity and the world, which were created good, became imperfect. God's perfect creations became imperfect and broken. This means broken things happen. People were born blind two thousand years ago, and it still can happen now.

But God is working to fix the world through his offer of salvation in Jesus Christ and his promise that Christ will come again to make all things new. The final realization of that promise, however, will be in God's time, not ours. For God a day can be like a thousand years (2 Pe. 3:8).

I'm reminded of a sign on the back of a bulldozer parked along a highway that had frequent traffic jams because of extensive road work being done. The sign said "The Road to Happiness is Always Under Construction."

That seems to be true, doesn't it? Bumps in the road are part of life. We can get slowed down, or have to wait or stop, or take a detour, because of things beyond our control. We also could say that the world is under construction. God is remodeling it and is not yet finished. Some things still need to be fixed. And until that happens there will be trials, tribulations, and difficulties.

In the meantime, we can only trust that God will redeem our struggles. And Jesus, through his healing miracles, offered a preview of this future time when things no longer will be broken. Only good things will happen to good people. He pulled aside the curtain and briefly showed us the future kingdom. But even though the previews were real, the main attraction is still to come.

III.

This leads to the other point. How do we know God's grace in the meantime? Today's reading offers one answer. Jesus redeemed the blind man's affliction by physically healing him. And many of us probably can recall modern-day miracles like that when people have recovered their health after prayer, or anointing, or trusting in God to help in other ways.

I can offer an example. Nine years ago a close friend was diagnosed with a slow growing form of incurable cancer. One Friday night Susan and I, and our friend and his wife, went to a healing service where the officiant laid hands on him and anointed him. The following week he had an examination with no sign of the cancer. To this day it still is gone.

But even apart from miraculous healings or unexplainable improvements in medical conditions, this Gospel reading shows other ways in which God is at work in our lives. Jesus made the point that he also came to heal spiritual blindness. And he used the Pharisees as an example.

Even though they could see, they did not believe. They were spiritually blind and rejected Jesus' teaching. Sometimes we say seeing is believing. But this reading says just the opposite. It tells us that believing is seeing.

This means there is a direct relationship between believing, and receiving God's healing grace. Jesus said he came into the world so that those who do not see may see. He wanted people to

believe God was acting through him. And he wanted people to believe that in accepting God's power and love through him, they could be healed.

But it is important to realize that when Jesus promised through belief we all will be healed, he did not promise that we all would be cured. There is a distinction between these two ideas.

Being healed can be spiritual. Being cured is clinical. In the first case we know God's peace and draw on his strength in times of difficulty. In the other case, when it happens, we experience relief from illness and instinctively know that God is responsible.

And while Jesus' miracles in the Bible often resulted in medical cures, his purpose also pointed toward the spiritual healing that comes with belief.

As a result, we can be confident that even in this broken world Jesus will heal us, sometimes physically and always spiritually. And prayer is an important factor. In James' letter, our Lord's brother said that, "The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up [so] that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective" (5:15-16).

And it is not limited to health. Healings also happen in family relationships, in the workplace, and in every area where we interact with God's creation. But it doesn't always happen exactly as we wish. Faith is not an insurance policy against difficulties, and God's will for us is not always the solution we think we want.

Finally, I want to make the essential point that it is false to think people are not cured because they do not have enough faith. It is false to think that God wants us to learn from illness or suffering. And it is false to think that God gives illness or other problems as a cross to bear.

An old saying holds that adversity builds character. There is some truth in that. The Book of Hebrews said that God, like our own parents, disciplines us for our own good (12:7-11). But we do not experience adversity as a function of our faith. God does not work that way.

IV.

A few years ago the actor and comedian Woody Allen gave a commencement address. Many of you remember Woody Allen, and might recall his dark and cynical sense of humor.

And in this commencement address, in typical fashion, he said to the graduates, "More than ever before in history, humanity is at a crossroads. One path leads to despair and utter hopelessness. The other leads to total extinction. Let us pray we have the wisdom to choose correctly."

We can thank God that we have a better choice than that. It is a choice between trusting only in ourselves and the world, or trusting in God's love and redeeming grace.

But we do have to engage and interact with an increasingly secular world. We are called to work for a just society. We have a responsibility to love God and our neighbors, to support our communities, and to be good citizens. But after having done all that we still will be faced with times when we simply have to believe and know that we will be healed.

And it always is God's will that we be healed. If it is to be a medical cure, it will happen. If God wants us first to unburden ourselves or do something else about our lifestyles to enable a cure to occur, the Holy Spirit will speak to us about that.

And we always know that faith can heal us spiritually, it can open us to God's healing grace, and it can make real the promise that we can do all things through him who strengthens us (Phi. 4:13). *Amen.*