

Whose Responsibility Is It, Anyway?

By Paul Richard

In John 9, an account is given of a man born blind. The disciples pose a question that is somewhat troubling. “Who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?” At first glance this is a theological query that goes back to the days of Job whose friends sought to hang on him the responsibility for the disasters that came upon him. Certainly there must have been some sin that caused all this to happen. But I think hidden in this question is also the issue of the disciples’ personal responsibility to another’s circumstances. This can be seen if we suppose that Jesus answers their question in the positive.

“Yes, it was his sin that caused his blindness.” To this the disciples may have taken a position such as, “Well, then let him deal with the problem of his blindness. It is his fault, therefore let him deal with the consequences.”

Or, “Yes, it was his parents’ sin that caused his blindness.” To this the disciples could have said, “Then let his parents deal with him. He is their responsibility and so should provide for him for the rest of his life.”

In both cases the desired relief comes to the disciples —“I am not responsible.”

But Jesus’ answer reveals something about discovering the Kingdom of God in ways neither the disciples, nor we, expect.

“Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.” Maybe the question they, and we, should ask instead is, “How can we see the work of God?”

Who wouldn’t want to see the Works of God? It sounds like a movie in which we might see all of Hollywood’s amazing special effects. Throughout the Old and New Testament we read about the works of God’s hand: Israel’s deliverance from Pharaoh...the parting of the Red Sea...David slaying Goliath...the feeding of 5,000+ people from a few loaves of bread and some fish...and ultimately our reconciliation with God through the death and resurrection of Jesus. All of these are amazing.

But consider for a moment in whom Jesus is saying the work of God will be seen. One of the aspects of this story that we often overlook is this man’s economic situation. Three times the passage reminds us that he was a beggar, one of which has a rather condescending feel to it: “Isn’t this the man who used to sit and beg?” This was not some middle class blind man who showered that morning and was out doing some power begging that day. He was a poor beggar who looked every bit the part.

If we had the courage to hear the answer to the question, “How can we see the works of God?” we might hear Jesus say, “Hang out with this guy.” “Wait Jesus, this guy is not my responsibility. The situation he is in is his fault. I want to see the real works of God.” Like Herod or the Pharisees, we are looking for a sign or a miracle.

The problem is that we are so hung up on people taking personal responsibility for their own situations that we cannot see beyond this to entering a relationship with someone who has not quite figured out how to pull themselves together. And often their situation is a culmination of many things that are outside of their control. But still we insist on blaming them. It is the mantra of the middle class that if someone has got themselves into a particular mess, then they should get themselves out of it. But each of us, as we stand before God, are in situations in which we cannot help ourselves and were it not for God coming to us we would be in desperate straits indeed. As we become involved with the helpless, we become most like God and through that relationship we discover God himself in ways we cannot in any other way.

Later in this chapter, the Pharisees demonstrate the very attitude that the disciples question implies. "You were steeped in sin from birth and are you lecturing us? And they put him out." They looked at this man as a culmination of his own sins and they could not see him as anything else. The man whom Jesus healed did have something to teach them, but they were too hung up on the source of his blindness to hear him.

As Jesus heals this man's blindness, he demonstrates that he is willing to accept personal responsibility for this man, and not only for his blindness, but also for his spiritual condition as well. As we enter into the lives of those carrying the burden of poverty, we also discover the privilege of sharing their burden and in the midst of that, discovering the works of God...and, even better... God Himself.