

Doing the Works of God during the Coronavirus Outbreak
John 9:1-12

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Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world."
Jn. 9:3-5

The gospel lection for March 22 is apropos to our situation. The details of our situation need no further explanation. They are plain in the news, in the closed schools, the closed restaurants, the closed sports venues, and the closed churches. There is sickness all around. Those who have not contracted the sickness have contracted concern over the sickness.

The New Testament is at home with sickness. The case before us in John 9 is not one of a person who is sick but of a person with a disability. Even so, we can use this story to our purpose now.

The human tendency is to ask why, to wonder why a sickness has happen, to seek an explanation as to why a person has to suffer as he or she does. The disciples fall right into this human desire to know why. "Who sinned," they asked, "this man or his parents that he was born blind?" It is as if they ignore the man himself as a person and treat him instead as an object lesson for a theological discussion about human suffering.

Jesus throws their question completely aside and puts the focus not on giving an explanation but on issuing a call to action. Verse 4 is the heart of his response: "We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work."

Let's linger over the first part of this verse. It calls us in these Coronavirus days to do the works of God. But what are the works of God we should be doing? Instead of importing material from elsewhere, let's study just this story of the man born blind to watch for the actions of Jesus – the works he does – and then we can let those be our guide in terms of the work we should be doing.

Trust in the goodness of God.

The first work I see suggested by this story is that we should trust in the goodness of God.

The disciples seem ready to find fault: "who sinned?" And, close on the heels of that, they reach for a God'll-get-you-for-that mentality that traffics in the harsh vindictiveness of God. "Who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?" As if Mighty God would unleash the power of divine anger on a faultless infant! That way of thinking strikes me as a form of blasphemy. Surely God is better than that.

Jesus takes an attitude wholly different from that of his disciples. He suggests this man's blindness has nothing to do with anyone's sinfulness. It is instead, he sees, a chance for God to work God's wonders. This, Jesus believes, is a chance for God to reveal God's glory. That attitude of Jesus leads me to think the question in a season of suffering is not why has God caused this terrible thing but rather what is God doing about it? How is God's love and glory and goodness being shown now, in this mess?

So the first work we can do while the Coronavirus is about is to put away poor theology that believes small, petty things about God, and to trust in the goodness of God.

Tend to the need that is near.

There is a second work that emerges as we follow the actions of Jesus in the story of the man born blind, and that is to tend to the need that is near.

Jesus treats this man in the story. The method he uses is not a model to us to use in these days of so much social distancing! Jesus sets it up as though he is going to do something high, holy, liturgical, and solemn: "We must work the works of him who sent me . . ." You might expect something dignified to follow a statement like that, but Jesus *spits*. Imagine the poor blind man's reaction! He can't see, of course; he can only hear and the feel. He can only hear first the spitting and then feel the wet mud applied to his eyes. I wonder if this is to be taken to mean God's work in the world is earthy, physical, tactile.

While we are not in a position to return anyone's sight or cure anyone of the Coronavirus, we are in a position to tend to the need that is before us. We can do something to help someone at hand. We can connect with someone who is isolated, by giving them a call, sending an email, or other kind of note. We can bring practical help to people in the form of shopping for some groceries or running an errand. We can also give blood.

I gave blood on Wednesday. I say that, not to brag, but to testify that it is safe. I always use the Red Cross Collection Center on Sheboygan Avenue in Madison. And it felt to me completely safe to be there. They took the temperature of people as soon as they walked in. They insisted on the use of hand-sanitizer before touching anything. Every bit of the protocol from start to finish was conscientious and secure. There is a need for blood just now, and it is safe to give.

It is right for us to be practicing social distancing, but we should still be tending to the need that is near. Sherrol and I heard a quotation over the television the other day – I do not recall who it was who spoke it – and I rather like it. The person said, "Social distancing does not mean social disengagement." We still have to practice social engagement. We still have to be for others. That is what Christians do. That is what the church is.

Be light in the darkness.

There is a third work we can be doing that emerges from the story of the man born blind. In John 9:5 Jesus says, "As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world."

Now, we can't be that light. Only Jesus can be that light. But we can reflect that light, and the reflecting can be powerful.

There was a brilliant full moon the other night not many nights ago. That moon shone so brightly that it woke me in the night. Nothing wakens me in the night, but that moon did. And what strikes me about it now is that the moon itself does not shine. It reflects, and its reflecting had the power to stir.

We can reflect the light of Christ in that way, and chiefly it happens when we stay close to him. If you have not taken the time before to develop a devotional life, now is the time to begin to develop a devotional life. Open your New Testament every day to a gospel page. Read a paragraph or two; often it does not have to be more to get a complete story or scene. Read the paragraph several times over. Say nothing – don't rush to your prayers – say nothing but use what's in the text to help you sit in Christ's presence. Gradually, the more you do this, the more you will come to reflect the light of Jesus.

The days that are upon us now are full of uncertainty. We want to do more than wash our hands, though we know that is important. We want to do more than to protect ourselves. But what are we supposed to do? We can do the works of the God who sends us into the world as divine servants. We can trust in the goodness of God, tend to the need that is near, and be light in the darkness by reflecting the light of Jesus.