
Love, No Questions Asked

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon Julia Mitchener
The Fourth Sunday in Lent – Year A**

In her book *Traveling Mercies*, writer Anne Lamott describes the incident that finally cured her of her lifelong obsession with the size of her rear end. She was visiting a shopping mall one day with her best friend, a young woman who, only a few weeks after adopting her long awaited first child, had been diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer and given just a few years to live. In a store, Lamott was trying on a dress she feared was unflattering. Exiting the changing room, she asked her friend's opinion about her appearance, to which the friend clucked her tongue and said, in effect, "You know, Annie, you really don't have that kind of time. You don't have enough time in life to be worried about that sort of thing." Brought up short, Lamott hastily bought the dress, rushed home to pull her own small child close, and, I like to imagine, tossed all her Spanx right into the trash.^[1]

There is a sense of urgency in this morning's gospel lesson, a sense that time is short—a sense that time is short and that there is not any of it to waste. Jesus and his disciples are walking along one day when they encounter a man who is blind, a man who, in fact, has been blind since birth. The disciples start talking amongst themselves, wondering how it was that this man came to be born with what was considered one of the greatest afflictions of the ancient world. "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

This question may sound harsh and absurd, even revolting, to us. Modern medical science, after all, can tell us the causes of blindness, and sin isn't one of them. The disciples' question may sound harsh and absurd, but it actually reflects a common notion of their time; namely, that if something bad happened to someone, then it was probably the result of that person's sin. What had the blind man—or the blind man's parents—done to merit his affliction?

Truth be told, we often ask questions today that are not all that different. I know I do. A group of us here at the Cathedral have been reading and discussing a book called *Maid* this Lent.^[2] *Maid* is the memoir of a young woman named Stephanie Land, who struggles to provide food, shelter, and clothing for herself and her baby daughter on a domestic worker's wages. I've been struck by the amount of armchair quarterbacking I've done as I've made my way through this book. As I've read of Ms. Land's daily battles with pain, hunger, and homelessness, an abusive ex-partner and clients who keep canceling on her with no notice, I've found myself wondering,

What might I have done differently had I been in her situation? How might I have parented or managed my money or handled myself in another way? In other words, what did she do wrong, and how would I have done it better? Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?

Notice, though, how in today's reading from the Gospel of John, when the disciples get caught up in this same sort of armchair quarterbacking (*Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?*)—notice that when the disciples get caught up in this same sort of armchair quarterbacking, Jesus just gets on with his work. Rather than standing on the sidelines until all theological conundrums have been resolved, he runs straight out onto the field to show mercy to the blind man. He heals him right on the spot, noting, "We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work." In other words, as an oft-quoted blessing puts it: "Life is short and we do not have much time to gladden the hearts of those who walk this way with us. So be swift to love and make haste to be kind."^[3]

Through the centuries, Christians have spent near endless amounts of time wrestling with questions ranging

from the theological to the ethical to the liturgical to the *Why do Bad Things Happen to Good People?* sort. How many books should there be in the Bible? Can people of faith go to war in good conscience? Should women be allowed to be priests? Should gay people be allowed to marry? Asking questions can be clarifying and can help us move forward in faithful witness to the Gospel. Sometimes, though, it's possible to get so caught up in our questions that we allow the ambiguities of human existence to interfere with the hard work of discipleship, the hard work of following Jesus even when the path ahead is not clear. Think about some of the biggest, most disputed questions of our time, questions that often find Jesus' followers at loggerheads: How should we respond to all the migrants who keep flocking to our nation's borders? What's the best way to stop generational poverty? How can we make sure that more children are deeply loved and wanted when they're born? There are questions in which it's possible to get so mired down that we take our uncertainties and our disagreements as an excuse to stagnate and withdraw, to allow ourselves to stand at a distance from our sisters and brothers who are hurting. Jesus' swift action in healing the blind man even in the midst of his disciples' uncertainty reminds us that the confusion and complexity of life does not let us off the hook from loving, from alleviating pain wherever, and whenever, we can without regard for the perceived worthiness or "righteousness" of those who are suffering. When in doubt, love. When you think someone isn't deserving of it, love still. When you feel absolutely certain you've made better life choices than those people over there, love still some more.

All of which can make for a bit of a mess. Then again, loving is a messy business. It is for Jesus. This is what ultimately gets him killed—his crazy, sloppy, radical, no questions asked, no holds barred commitment to love. Loving is a messy business for Jesus and it can be for us, too. Sometimes when we take the risk of loving, we get taken for a ride, we get taken advantage of, we get played for fools. Sometimes acts of great love prove to be offensive, they wreak havoc with social norms regarding what is reasonable, what is acceptable, what is moral, what is expedient, what is practical. Loving can be a messy business, but that's all right. Because this morning's gospel shows us what Jesus can do with a mess: ". . . He spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, 'Go, wash in the pool of Siloam . . .'. Then [the man] went and washed and came back able to see." Jesus can do a lot with a mess. He can take a mess and use it to heal. He can take a mess and use it to bring light where there has been only darkness. Jesus shows us, again and again, how we can live faithfully and responsively in all the uncertainties of our broken and troubled world: messily, but lovingly; with questions but also with commitments; with doubt and sometimes fear, but also with "gladness and singleness of heart." And right on time, too. Amen.

^[1] Lamott, Anne. *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*. Penguin Random House, 2000.

^[2] Land, Stephanie. *Maid: Hard Work, Low Pay, and a Mother's Will to Survive*. Grand Central Publishing, 2019.

^[3] Attributed to Henri Frederic Amiel