

“No Good Deed Goes Unpunished”

John 9:1–41

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Some expressions require explanation, some do not. “No good deed goes unpunished” falls into the latter category. Most of us have experienced this dynamic. We tried to help a friend or family member only to be criticized for trying. A mentor of mine spent time with a troubled family visiting our church and told them to let him know if there was anything he could do to help. They called a couple weeks later and asked him to take their two teenage children, permanently. For a time, we bought bus tickets in bulk at a discounted rate to help people with transportation, but the word spread like wildfire and there were so many abuses that we had to stop. No good deed goes unpunished.

This is Jesus’ experience on numerous occasions, including the one we have read about today from John 9. He heals a man who has been born blind. It is an extraordinary act of kindness and compassion, so much so that we might think everyone is delighted. They are not.

The healing creates all sorts of challenges for the man who goes through a series of interrogations, but Jesus is the ultimate target of the criticism. Now, some of the dialogue seems like it is taken from a Monty Python movie. “He’s not from God, how could he do this?” sounds a bit like, “Of course, she’s a witch, look at her nose!” And then, we have the man saying to the Pharisees, “Do you also want to become his disciples?” Perhaps that sounds more like the Marx Brothers...

But though humor is involved, the criticism is serious. Jesus has inspired the wrath of his adversaries, and they have so much power that everyone else in the story – friends, neighbors, family members – is hesitant to speak about the man who has been healed or the healer. No good deed goes unpunished... but why? What is going on here?

One thing that is going on is that a very common human flaw is on display. Leaders don’t like someone else getting the credit and praise for

doing something good. Jesus is showing up the religious leaders, even though they won't admit it. He is doing things they cannot do. They claim that their problem is with his healing on the Sabbath — we'll get to this — but while the claim has validity, they also just don't want this outsider, this uncredentialed man, making them look less competent. Leaders don't like someone else getting the credit.

We might think of this in the realm of American politics. It explains, at least in part, why our government cannot seem to solve a long list of longstanding political challenges, like developing a comprehensive immigration policy that is both compassionate and protective of our borders. It's not that no one knows how to solve the problem; it's that neither party wants the other to get the credit. In fact, some individuals don't want anyone else in their own party to get the credit, or they see the problem as a political advantage they want to keep. So, even bipartisan attempts at improvement are rejected.

But this unattractive human quality is not restricted to the political world. There are people in many work settings who can't bear it if someone else has the great idea. There are athletes who become jealous when another player improves dramatically and helps the team. There are even church people who get hung up on who gets the credit for an idea, who gets the spotlight. In all these cases, we might think everyone would be happy with the win, but just as not everyone is happy about the man born blind being healed, not everyone enjoys the win.

Children do this better than adults. I remember helping a friend coach our five-year-old daughters' soccer team years ago. I had no business coaching soccer at any level. I ran competitively and played a number of sports, but soccer was not one of them. I could help them run, and with five-year-olds, the primary objective is to get them to stop playing clump ball and spread out on the field. But the two most interesting things I noticed were that both teams always thought they won, even though we didn't keep score, and no matter who made a goal, everyone celebrated and hugged. Adults could learn from children...

The religious leaders in our story from John 9 don't like someone else getting the credit for doing something good, especially someone

else named Jesus. But they are also concerned about their rules, their Sabbath rules, and Jesus has broken one by healing on the Sabbath. It is not a life and death situation. The man is blind, but he could be healed on any other day. This is why they think Jesus is a sinner, not from God, at least in the framework of this story. He is not a righteous man.

It is not exactly like the Monty Python scene in which a carrot is attached to a woman's face and the crowd says, "Of course, she's a witch, just look at her nose!" but it's not far off either. Sabbath rules are part of the faith, and they do matter, but there are very few of these in scripture. Over time dozens and dozens of rules are added by those in charge of policing the rules. The religious leaders know this. They know these rules should not carry the same weight as scripture.

But even the rules that are in scripture have a purpose which is to make sure people take time to rest and focus on God (Exodus 20:8-11), to remember God's deliverance of the people from bondage and their calling to liberate others (Deuteronomy 5:12-15). Jesus says the Sabbath is made for humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath (Mark 2:27). In this light, how can an act of healing be contrary to God's purpose? Jesus liberates the man from a very real kind of bondage.

It seems incredibly misplaced and narrow-minded for leaders to criticize Jesus as a way of enforcing their rules, but before we rush to judgment, we might want to consider various traditions we have honored over the years which are not only not in scripture but don't square with the heart of biblical teaching about the love of God and neighbor, traditions that get in the way of us ministering to people.

There were the old rules of southern piety that got people kicked out of churches, including one I served, before my time, for just going to a dance and watching, not even dancing. There was the old thinking about race. One church I served bragged about its afterschool program that served an interracial, inner-city community, but blew a gasket when we started inviting persons of color to worship with us. And in many churches like ours there was a pattern of dressing so formally that people who did not have formal clothes did not feel welcome.

Churches have had all sorts of social conventions that not only don't square with the heart of Christian teaching but contradict it. But

there are also times when we are just so busy going through the motions of doing church that we ignore needs right in front of us.

In his book *The Philippian Fragment* Calvin Miller presents letters from a mythical early church leader named Eusebius of Philippi who describes challenges very much like our own. In one section of a letter entitled “The Acting of Compassion,” he says he has committed an unpardonable sin and thus angered the Constable Coriolanus, a pillar of the church he serves. His “sin” is that he has left the church on Sunday morning when he has heard that Publius the Paralytic is critically ill.

He has prayed with him and miraculously, Publius has been healed, not of his paralysis, but of the fever, he will live. But in Eusebius’ absence, no sermon has been preached – for the first time in his thirty years as a member, says Coriolanus! The people have sung through thirty-one hymns before gratefully pronouncing a benediction. Most have developed a blessed hoarseness they refer to as *doxoma*. What was Eusebius thinking? “Well,” he replies, “I felt that the ninety and nine were safe in the fold. Publius was about to die.” This did not help.

Eusebius goes on to describe a challenge his mentor, Constantinus, faced at his church in Antioch. One day, five minutes before the service was to begin, a Roman chariot ran over a beggar and left him dying in front of the church. The pastor was grieved that the members stepped over the dying man to carry their prayer scrolls into the sanctuary. He scooped up the man and carried him to his grieving widow, getting blood all over his hands and toga. Many in the congregation never forgave him for leading worship with a blood-stained toga.

It is a mythical church, but when we think about contemporary practices and the needs of the world, the basic premise is not off-base. There are people in need we are tempted to step over as we come to church; there are still rules and traditions that get in the way of ministry.

But while all this deserves our attention, there is something else going on in this story that we ought not miss — a man is healed of blindness and thus allowed a fuller life, a man is healed! It is easy become so distracted by the criticism that we miss the point – Jesus heals the man, on the Sabbath, no matter what anyone else thinks.

I think of the day in December 2010 when Elizabeth Edwards' funeral was held at Edenton Street United Methodist Church. Some of you will recall that the hateful people from Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas showed up with their ugly signs and vile language, demeaning a person at the time of her death. There were only a few of them, but they were given space in front of our church. There was a counter-protest group across the street, a much larger group, and it was the day of Toy Joy. So, there was a long line of people outside waiting, it's how we did it back then, and hundreds of volunteers inside.

A newspaper reporter was sent to do a story on the Westboro people, but she was diverted to Toy Joy and ended up writing a story that simply painted a picture of all that was happening. What was the real story — the hatred of a few people or even those opposing hatred... or the fact that a kind woman had died and a church nearby was full of people serving over a thousand children and their families?

It is a question we ought to ask more often. What is the real story? In our text, it is that Jesus is able to heal brokenness, and he will do so, no matter who gets offended or why. There are two implications for us. First, this means healing is available for us, which is good news because we all know brokenness of one kind or another. We do not always get exactly what we want, but God in Christ offers healing in some form to all who are broken. Second, as followers of Jesus, we are called to be about the work of healing, no matter who gets offended or why.

Some people may not like us standing with immigrants. Others may think poor people are to blame for their plight and thus we shouldn't spend so much time handing out clothing, sharing food, and providing shelter on cold nights. Some may think LGBT people are going to hell, along with anyone who is kind to them. There will always be naysayers for any act of kindness and compassion, justice and love. In fact, some religious leaders question the use of words like "justice" and "empathy." But it doesn't mean they are right or that we should stop following our conscience, our sense of where the Spirit is leading.

No good deed goes unpunished, but Jesus does good anyway, and so should we, so should we.