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Truths That Power Bigotry

“As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’—John 9:1–2

And so there it is. As natural as breathing in and out. Without a doubt in the world. “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” The question is not asked in a hateful way. It is not full of venom and invective. This is not Christian fundamentalists calling Islam an evil religion, or Muslim fundamentalists calling for death to Christian America. This is smooth and simple and as natural as can be: “Who sinned, Jesus, this man or his parents, because we know someone’s sin is responsible for his condition.”

Do you see how easy that theological bigotry flows out of the disciples’ mouths? Not because they are bad people. After all, these are devout followers of Jesus who have left all to follow him. They have proven their willingness to sacrifice on behalf of others. But since they were children they have been taught a truth they believe without even thinking about it: sin is the root cause of a condition like blindness. It might be the person’s sin, or the person’s ancestors, but someone, somewhere did something so bad that God punished the sin with blindness. They all know it. Without a doubt.

And we are shocked or disgusted that anyone, anywhere at anytime could equate blindness with sinfulness. It offends our sensibilities. To be disabled by a condition like a loss of vision produces sympathy in us, not a theological riddle about sinfulness. Who are these people in the Bible who think such backwards thoughts? Well, they are our spiritual ancestors. They are the founders of the church. They are the first followers of Jesus.

And from that time until now, theological bigotry as existed and flourished in the church. Not just in some churches; in all churches. Not just in fundamentalist churches; in all churches. Not just in churches down the street; in all churches. We are all the inheritors and progenitors of this bias that uses the category of sin to label people who are different from us. And this soft bigotry is so pervasive that we hardly even notice it. “Who sinned, this man or his parents . . .” It just popped out and none of the disciples thought a thing about it.

Consider all the different ways in church history this pattern has been manifested. Slavery, segregation, and insidious racism lasted so long in this country not because a bunch of kooks in bed sheets were in control. No, the church must bear much of the responsibility. The Bible was used in some churches to teach that blacks were inferior to whites; in more moderate churches the Bible was used to suggest that a separation of the races was God's intended design; and then a lot of churches just stayed quiet about the continual destruction of a whole race of people. And some of the extremists said the darker people were cursed, and the moderates said sin entered the world and separated the races. But it really didn't matter if your theological bigotry toward black people was of the lunatic variety or the softer, gentler kind. The results were the same. White people and black people didn't mix, they didn't go to church together, and the social and economic inequalities were just the way things were. Everyone knew it. And someone, somewhere, probably asked his preacher years ago: "Who sinned, preacher, the black folks or their parents, that they have to suffer so?"

Or what about the history of women in the church? For a long time the Bible was used to deny women basic human rights. They couldn't vote or own property or speak in church. Even today, the two largest Christian bodies in this country, the Roman Catholic Church and the Southern Baptist Convention, actively teach that women are not suitable for the priesthood and pastorate. Why? Because the Bible says so. This misogynistic theology just flows through the church like air through the vents. And few people even question it. And someone, somewhere, probably has asked his priest: "Who sinned, father, this woman or her mother, that she is not fit for leadership in the church?"

And all of this makes us cringe. How horrifying that people of faith have used the scriptures to denounce blind people, black people, and women as less than. As sinful. Because we know what the misappropriation of that sin label means. It means if someone is suffering because of their own sin we don't have to care about them. They are flawed because of something they have done, or because of something inherently wrong with them, and that lets us off the hook. But we denounce that kind of thinking now, don't we? You couldn't find a church where blindness is described as a curse from God, even though that theology was once so pervasive that Jesus' disciples spoke it without thinking. And I hope you couldn't find a church where people still talk about the "curse of Ham" to rationalize racism and the persecution of African Americans, even though not so long ago that theology was pervasive in some churches. Sadly, though, patriarchy still reigns supreme and you will still find

churches that use the Bible to deny women an equal role in leadership. But even in the most conservative churches the preacher would get in trouble if he suggested it was the sinful nature of women that made them unqualified for the pulpit.

So, we are making progress, right? I wish I could say yes, but it seems the pattern remains just as persistent even if the targets of theological bigotry keep shifting. Today the main concern of some in the church is keeping the pure heterosexuals untainted from the evil homosexuals. The tremendous suffering of the gay community is completely ignored by the church because, after all, being attracted to someone of the same sex is a sin. How do we know that? Well, everyone knows that the Bible says so. Just like everyone used to know that black people were inferior and women were less than and even blind people were sinful because the scriptures said so somewhere. Today Presidential elections can be manipulated and shifted if you can get enough Christians concerned about same-sex marriage. And you can get a church kicked out of some judicatories if there is even a hint that they tolerate gay people in their pews. But the conservatives in the church who beat up on gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people like it is a sport isn't my chief concern. What galls me are the moderates, like those in control of our mainline Christian traditions, who don't want to beat up on gay people but who, when push comes to shove, will always reinforce the old line that "homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching." And they say it with the same ease and confidence as Jesus' disciples suggested the blind man or his parents had sinned. Do you see how insidious this is? If you can just get a group of people labeled as sinful then you can ignore them, exclude them, disenfranchise them, and turn your back on their suffering.

But here's the thing. The day will come, not nearly soon enough, when our children and grandchildren will look back on this period in the church's history and wonder how in the world we could have spent so much time and energy on demonizing gay people. They will look at the twisted ways the Bible has been used to support homophobia with the same disgust we have when we view the way our ancestors used the Bible to undergird slavery and misogyny. And those future generations will wonder how this could have taken place so easily, with so little outcry.

To heal bigotry in all its awful manifestations you have to start by labeling things correctly. You can't call that which is beautiful in the eyes of God sinful. And one thing I believe is that people with disabilities and people of color and women and people of all sexual and gender identities are beautiful in the eyes of God. The sin in

this case has been the church's for calling those people who are sacred sinful. I pray God will forgive us.

But fixing our theological bigotry is only the first step. The next step, the one that is taking too long to accomplish, is to demonstrate our change of heart and mind by fully including those we have excluded. That is why it will be so important when a woman or person of color or a sexual minority becomes President of our country. To put the final nails in the demonic exclusion of certain people groups you not only have to end the blatant discrimination; you have to undermine that easy, soft bigotry that says such people may not have what it takes to be the ultimate leader.

Jesus said, just before he reached out to touch the blind man who had been mislabeled as sinful, "We must work the works of the One who sent me . . ." We have much work to do in the church. Let us reach out to those who have been cruelly mislabeled as sinful and let us make sure that such easy, theological bigotry is never easy again.

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