

Story and Meditation: A Different Way

March 22, 2020

Fourth Sunday in Lent

John 9:1-41

by *Eric Anderson*

The young koa'e kea knew how to fish. Step one: Fly over a particular patch of sea. Step two: Look down. Step three: Spot a school of fish or squid. Step four: Pick one. Step five: Hover briefly with your beak pointed at the fish. Step six: Dive! Step Seven: Lunch.

It's a little more complicated than going to the grocery store, but the koa'e kea spends less time waiting in line.

This koa'e kea knew how to fish. Fly. Look. Spot. Choose. Hover. Dive. Lunch. Easy.

He became aware, however, that the looking and spotting was taking longer than it used to. There weren't as many fish around. He'd fly out to the same spot every day, and every day there were fewer fish. He couldn't understand it.

The fish, you see, weren't staying in one place. They were following their own food, or warmer water, or colder water, or whatever fish want. It happened to be that they weren't finding what they wanted in the spot where our koa'e kea wanted to find them.

"Move on," said his parents. "Find another spot."

"Move on," said his friends. "There's fish out there. We've found them."

"I know just how to fish," said the koa'e kea, because he didn't want to admit there was something he didn't know. "This is where the fish are. This is where I'll fish."

Even though there were fewer and fewer fish there.

It was tutu – grandmother – who finally got through to him as he got to looking rather hungry.

"How's the fishing going?" she asked.

"Not so great," he admitted. A koa'e kea can't lie to a tutu.

"Still doing the same thing?" she asked.

"I know how to fish," he huffed.

“Is it working?”

“Well, no.”

Tutu sighed. “Then maybe you should try something different,” she said.

When the same thing over again doesn’t work, it’s time to try something different.

That’s why I’m talking to you via a camera over the Internet today. Doing things in the ordinary way – gathering for worship, everyone in one place at the same time – won’t work for us right now. Keeping physical distance helps slow the spread of COVID-19 disease. Most people who get it will be unhappy and uncomfortable for a while – four out of five, apparently – but one out of five people could get very sick indeed. We simply don’t have hospital space for a fifth of our population, not on Hawai’i Island, not in this state, and not anywhere in the United States or the world.

So we have to slow it down, make sure that a massive number of people don’t get sick at the same time and overwhelm our medical resources.

That’s why we’re doing things differently this Sunday.

Jesus did things a little differently that day near the pool of Siloam. First, he refused to play the “blame game” about the situation of a disabled person. “Who sinned?” they asked him. “Nobody did,” said Jesus.

We like to play the “blame game,” though, don’t we? We want to blame China, or Italy, or cruise ship operators, or the President, or the Mayor. Indeed, there’s been plenty of errors, plenty of coming late to realize what we face, plenty of needless delay. It is on us to learn from those errors and not repeat them. Professional, medical, and governmental leaders also need to learn from the mistakes others have made. If they’re going to make mistakes, make new ones. Do something different.

It’s when people don’t learn from prior errors that things go from bad to very bad to catastrophic.

Jesus refused to do follow the mistake of blaming a blind man or his parents for his disability. He chose to do something different instead.

Some of it wasn’t very different. Making mud with saliva sounds really icky to us, but I’m afraid it was common medical practice in the first century and thank God we’ve learned from our errors and we’re not doing that any more. We also don’t put mud in people’s eyes, and thank God for that, too.

I do observe that Jesus then told him to go wash. That's a direction we should certainly follow now.

Jesus didn't stop to ask what day it was. It was the Sabbath. No work is supposed to be done on the Sabbath, but the ancient teachers were divided about whether healing on the Sabbath was forbidden or not. Contradictory opinions are recorded in the Mishna and the Talmud, which quote several rabbis who lived before, during, and after the life of Jesus. Jesus had his own opinion about this, however. He was noted for it. He healed the man.

(<https://virtualreligion.net/iho/sabbath.html>)

It was a step away from the expected and the conventional, at least the expected and conventional of the teachers who grew so concerned that they eventually forbade the healed man to be part of the congregation.

Sometimes you've got to do things differently.

We have been through tough times together. This is another one. It's a really frustrating one, because one of the things we have treasured, one of the things that has sustained us, one of the things that has supported us, has been physical togetherness. That's the thing we cannot do right now.

As writer Andy Crouch tweeted on March 13th, "Honestly hadn't planned on giving up quite this much for Lent."

(<https://twitter.com/ahc/status/1238553514084884481>)

We will have to find new ways to be together. This is one. It's an experiment, and we hope it helps. We're trying other experiments as well. I'm going to sing a song to everyone once a week from here in the sanctuary, broadcast via YouTube on Wednesdays at 11 am. I plan to set up a Bible Study and prayer time via Zoom teleconferencing; please let me know via email or phone what would be a good time of day and week for you. And our Community Sing will be a live streamed one hour concert. You'll hear old favorites from me as well as some of my own songs. That will be Friday at 6 pm.

We're doing things in old ways that still work, too. We're expanding publication of the Messenger to weekly, so those without these technologies can hear that we love and care for them. If you need help with something, call us. We may not have a plan in place, but we'll do the very best we can to figure it out.

As Melinda Quivik writes at Working Preacher:

"This movement of events mirrors our world in every age:

Jesus came.

We wonder what happened and argue about it.

Jesus comes to us ... again and again ... with healing.”

(http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4410)

We also live in hope and faith. This may last a while. It will certainly last longer than any of us want it to last, because it already has. It will strain our resources of money, time, emotion, and resilience.

It will also strain our spirits, so do everything you can to strengthen the resources of your soul with daily prayer, reading of Scripture, humming a hymn to yourself, or watching one of the many pastors around the country who have suddenly become Internet preachers.

And, oh yes, do the thing that Jesus told the blind man to do:

Go wash.

Amen.