An interesting thing about humans is the ways in which we try and make sense of things. Our minds tend to like to understand why things happen and when an explanation is not readily available our minds are often happy to invent one. And, as with most things, some of these inventions are better than others. Here is what I mean by that. A number of years ago the family and I were flying through Denver on our way somewhere. The kids were younger and finding food could be a major issue. So, in preparation I looked online to figure out somewhere to eat at the Denver Airport during our stopover. While putting Denver Airport into the search engine, one of the suggestions was something known as the Denver Airport Conspiracy. Perhaps you have heard of it. The conspiracy has many tentacles, but like most conspiracies its components start from some bit of truth and then seeks to find diabolical reasons for why that particular thing occurred. And as with most conspiracies the more bizarre the explanation, the better. In the case of the Denver Airport, one of the facts is that, when it was built, the airport had major cost overruns. Most people would look at that bit of information and think cost overruns and government projects go together like rama lama lama ka dinga da dinga dong but for the conspiracist, the cost overruns are not so benign. According to them, the overruns are the price tag of the secret underground lair that has been built by the illuminati, the one world government and possibly the lizard people. This underground lair is to be used by the world’s elite when the apocalypse comes and the rest of us are wiped out. From my cynical perspective it seems that conspiracists reach their conclusion and then go looking for the facts to fit. But, to a lesser extent, I think we all are capable of engaging in this sort of behavior. We have a view of how the world should work and then we just kind of plug in the facts to fit this view, no matter how much we have to squint to make them fit. And this is not a new thing, just look at the Gospel lesson today. It is pretty long so I am just going to look at the early part where we read, “As Jesus 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?’ Jesus answered, ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.’”

The disciples had a system that worked like this: if there was anything wrong with an individual it was because they had done something really bad. There was, of course, a little grace in their system as they were willing to concede that it may have actually been this man’s parents who messed up. Either way, anything that was wrong with a person was directly linked to something they or their parents did. Also, note that the idea of really stretching things to meet your theory is not a new invention as the text tells us this man was blind from birth and yet the disciples seem perfectly happy to believe that he may have done some pretty serious sinning while he was still in the womb. You never let facts stand in the way of a good explanation. But today I want to reflect on this incident and ask why we want to blame people’s misfortunes on some personal defect and then look at Jesus’ explanation for why the man was the way he was.

In our day and age we might not blame someone’s problems on sin. After all, that might make us look like we go to church, instead we might blame it on someone’s parenting skills, political affiliation, or the fact that they are from New Jersey. And, in so doing, we not only get to have our prejudices confirmed, we also get to eliminate all uncertainty from the world. Everything makes sense and it makes sense in a way that makes us both feel good about ourselves and look down on others – it’s a twofer. In today’s lesson, the disciples were hoping to not have to bother with the man born blind from birth, because if it was his fault then he was really just getting what he deserved -- no need to stand in the way of God’s judgement. It reminds me of what I once heard someone who researches lung cancer say. They pointed out that they don’t get as much money as other types of cancer because people assume that if you have lung cancer it’s all your fault.

But Jesus shoots down the cause and effect that the disciples have come up with saying, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned.” And in his explanation he directly attacks a major component of the human condition, the desire to play God. The issue with playing God comes when we move from trying to understand how the world works, to explaining why the world works in the way it does. At its root it is not terrible to ask why the world works in a certain way. However, when we begin to answer that question, we need to be very humble, especially if we decide that God has a role to play in our explanation. In Isaiah 55:8 we hear, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord.” Humility is required because the only way in which we are able to explain things is by using our ways. The disciples today employ a fairly human contrivance – you sin, you go blind -- but it is not that simple as Jesus will explain.

So what is the answer to why the man was born blind? Well Jesus offers an explanation which has a more cosmic focus, saying, “He was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.” The explanation is that somehow this man’s blindness is part of the human condition and by being part of the human condition it can also be a place where we see God’s work. And, with this larger understanding we see that it is not just this man who is in need of healing. Rather, what Christ does to him is the same thing that Christ can do with our infirmities and frailties. All of our issues can be caught up in the healing work of Christ. In other words, we are just like the blind man in our need for Christ and Christ’s healing. It seems that in asking why this man was born blind, we should not be limiting it to one individual but rather why we are all, to a certain extent, born broken. We know that there are things wrong with us much like Paul when he asks, “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” We may not be fully clear on why we do things that go against the will of God, but what we do know is that Christ can rescue us from what Paul calls this body of death. In many ways what Jesus explains through the man born blind is that we all have things from which we need to be rescued. Some of these things may be readily apparent like blindness, but that does not mean that those with less apparent ailments are any less in need of the saving work of Jesus. If you want it in automotive terms, some of us might need a complete engine rebuild while others might just need a new fuel pump. But in both cases, without a repair, the car is unable to do what it is supposed to do. We cannot look down on those with “bigger” issues because ultimately, we are all in the same boat. We all cannot move forward without Jesus. So, while playing games of who sinned more might be fun, it misses the point that we all need Jesus and his saving work so that we may be his this day and forevermore.