

Welfare reform has had success and failures. Some people have moved from welfare to work, but others have not. Some try hard but cannot find a good job. This fall congress will face welfare reform again. They will challenge those who take advantage of welfare to give something to the community, but they will also provide for those who genuinely need assistance. Everyone will have to check our stereotypes of the poor. The rich tend to think of the poor as lazy. But no one works harder than some of the poor who put in long hours and scrimp their wages in order to get up on their feet. Our society tends to think if people are poor it's their own fault. That's just not true.

Jesus' society believed if people were disabled it was their own fault. When the disciples see a man blind from birth, they ask Jesus whose sin it was – this man's or his parents' – that caused his blindness. Jesus finds the question preposterous. He sees no relationship between sin and sickness. As the story progresses, he shows the connection between sin and the blindness of unbelief. The blind unbelief of the Pharisees symbolizes their sin. They abuse their authority by belittling others. They find evil in other people, but overlook it in themselves.

Even today it is hard for people to separate sickness and sin. If you suffer some illness or disability, you will wonder, "What did I do wrong?" If someone in your home suddenly becomes more dependent, you will wonder, "Why am I being punished?" We all know it's ridiculous to think that God punishes people with illness, but it is still hard to shirk the wonderment whenever sickness strikes.

Sadly, we are like the Pharisees in this gospel. Sin is not the cause of our physical sickness, sin is the cause of our spiritual sickness. Our selfishness blocks our kindness. Our greed hinders generosity. Our insecurity stifles proper care of ourselves. Pride thwarts humble service. Busyness makes it hard to quiet our spirits for prayer. There is a relationship between sin and sickness, but it pertains to spiritual sickness, not to physical sickness.

During Lent, those who will be baptized at Easter come to church for services we call scrutinies. One of the prayers is

called an exorcism. The terminology makes the whole ritual sound spooky, but it is a sincere prayer that God will exorcize or remove from the elect whatever blindness might be keeping them from Christ. It is a prayer for spiritual healing, a healing that all of us seek this time of year.

As we make our final preparations for Easter, let us use this time to uncover the blindness within us, and even though it is hard to look at our sin and admit our prejudices, let us ask Christ for sight.