

4th Sunday in Lent (Year A)

John 9:1-41

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?' Jesus answered, 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.' When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, 'Go, wash in the pool of Siloam' (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, 'Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?' Some were saying, 'It is he.' Others were saying, 'No, but it is someone like him.' He kept saying, 'I am the man.' But they kept asking him, 'Then how were your eyes opened?' He answered, 'The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, "Go to Siloam and wash." Then I went and washed and received my sight.' They said to him, 'Where is he?' He said, 'I do not know.'

They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, 'He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see.' Some of the Pharisees said, 'This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath.' But others said, 'How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?' And they were divided. So they said again to the blind man, 'What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.' He said, 'He is a prophet.'

The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight and asked them, 'Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?' His parents answered, 'We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.' His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. Therefore his parents said, 'He is of age; ask him.'

So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, 'Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner.' He answered, 'I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.' They said to him, 'What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?' He answered them, 'I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?' Then they reviled him, saying, 'You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.' The man answered, 'Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.' They answered him, 'You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?' And they drove him out.

Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, 'Do you believe in the Son of Man?' He answered, 'And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.' Jesus said to him, 'You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.' He said, 'Lord, I believe.' And he worshipped him. Jesus said, 'I

came into this world for judgement so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.' Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, 'Surely we are not blind, are we?' Jesus said to them, 'If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, "We see", your sin remains.

There are many accounts in the four gospels of Jesus bringing sight to blind people. But John's account stands apart from them for its detailed account of the fallout of such a miraculous occurrence. Of these 41 verses which make up the entirety of the ninth chapter of John's Gospel, a mere seven give account to the miracle itself - or *sign* as John would describe it. The remaining 34 verses are dedicated exclusively to the long line of dominoes that are set off because of this miracle. Nowhere else in the four gospels are we privy to such a detailed account of the community's reaction to a miracle of Jesus.

First, the formerly blind man's neighbors are confused. They do a classic double take when they see him walking without stumbling, doing something other than sit and beg. *That can't be him*, they say. They do not recognize him for one or both of two reasons. Either they did not recognize him because to do so would mean to accept the unbelievable - that this blind man would suddenly regain his sight. Either that or, secondly, they did not recognize him because, until then, they had seen him only for his blindness, they did not see him as a person. In other words, they could not *see* past his lack of sight - a beautiful irony if there ever was one.

They were naturally curious. Curiosity, it seems, is a major theme of the lectionary's recent passages from John's Gospel. Curiosity is what drove Nicodemus to question Jesus in the nighttime. Curiosity is what drove the woman at the well to question Jesus in the middle of the day. Curiosity, likewise, drives the neighbors of this formerly blind man to question him as to how this could possibly happen.

He gives them the play by play. "He made mud. He spread it on my eyes and told me to wash it off. I did. And now I see."

They want to know where this miracle worker is and ask him about his whereabouts but the man replies honestly that he does not know.

To this point in the story, the level of curiosity has been relatively innocent. However, the Pharisees enter and seem to have more sinister intentions. Their curiosity is driven not by a sense of bewilderment but by fear of their power being threatened. You see, they liked to see themselves as the experts of God's work in the world. They knew the laws. They knew the scriptures. They knew, in their eyes, exactly what God would and would not do. And one thing that God wouldn't do, in their opinion, is heal someone on the Sabbath, the sacred day of rest.

And so, the inquisition shows up. The pharisees corner the man and ask him for the play by play and he patiently repeats his account. "Spit, mud, eyes, washed, see." But this account was not good enough for the Pharisees. They could not believe. They were, well, "blind" to the possibilities of this prophet who purported himself to be the Light of the World.

And so, the inquisition decides to go to the formerly blind man's parents to get their side of the story. But they get no further with them. They are clearly afraid, knowing that this has caused quite a stir and they wanted to stay out of the fray. They remain tight-lipped and refer the Pharisees back to their son who, as they put it, is of age and can speak for himself.

Now things begin to get a little more heated. The Pharisees go back to the man and question him further. They accuse Jesus of being a sinner - presumably because he allegedly did work on the Sabbath. They ask the man for his opinion. A hint of annoyance creeps in and he gives a blunt reply: "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." The Pharisees are still not satisfied. After some more questioning, their fear gives way to anger and they throw the man out of the synagogue, effectively banning him from the community.

As is always the case, Jesus has made it a habit to seek out folks who have been marginalized. And, therefore, he goes out and seeks this man. First, he was marginalized for being blind. Now, he was marginalized for not giving the "powers that be" the answers that they wanted to hear.

To this point in this dizzying narrative, the healed man did not realize that Jesus was the Son of Man. He has been pretty clear about what he did understand: that he was blind and now he could see. However, Jesus confronts him and the man realizes that it is the very Light of the World that he is looking at and begins to worship him.

The narrative ends by suggesting, in an irony befitting of John's Gospel, that it is really the Pharisees - the ultimate "insiders" of the church - who are blind. And, thus, you and I are left to revel in the irony and then perhaps give way to a little uncomfortableness at the realization of who it is that we are playing in this dramatic narrative.

Now, this is one of those epic passages that presents the preacher with at least 351 different possible sermons. One could preach a sermon simply on the fact that the formerly blind man was unrecognizable by the community because the community chose to "see" him simply because of his disability. One could preach a sermon simply on the fact that the term "disability" is a bit of a misnomer, and that God gives each of us different talents and abilities. One could preach a sermon simply on the fact that the disciples were convinced that the man's blindness was the result of his sin or the sins of his parents. And, then, there are at least 348 more possibilities.

Fortunately for you, I am going to try to present only one sermon for you this day.

The sermon I am going to present to you this day has the following conviction about today's story about this blind man regaining his sight by the mercy of Jesus, and it is this:

The community failed. The community failed miserably to do what they should have done. An opportunity was missed. A potential was not met. Jesus did what he was supposed to do. The man who was formerly blind did everything he was supposed to do. But literally everyone else failed miserably.

And what I mean is this: a man who had been blind since birth was given the gift of sight. His cause for marginalization from the community was washed away. A whole new world of possibilities was opened before him. If there was *ever* a time for jubilant celebration, it was then! It was an opportunity for joy for the whole community. But everyone - and I mean *everyone* - his neighbors, the Pharisees, his very mother and father, threw that opportunity for joyful celebration in the trash. Instead, they chose to ignore every chance for worship, praise, thanksgiving, and wonder and decided to descend into the Spanish Inquisition to investigate the "legitimacy" of such a miraculous occurrence.

Simply put, they were much more concerned with how and why this happened rather than simply celebrate the fact *that* it happened.

Instead of greeting the man with glee and celebration, his neighbors instead chose to question whether it was really him.

Instead of seeing clearly enough to give thanks to God for this man's sight, the Pharisees instead chose to delegitimize Jesus by declaring him a sinner who blasphemed God for healing on the Sabbath.

Instead of throwing a huge party to celebrate their son's sight, his mother and father cowardly assume a fearful fetal position when the Pharisees come knocking.

We are left asking the following question: why couldn't the fact that a man who was blind now could see *be enough*?

The community had failed. Everyone had been witness to a great sign of God's kingdom, the restoration of a marginalized person to a seat at society's table. But instead of singing "I once was blind and now I see," they descend into petty squabbling. And way too often, petty squabbling tends to suck the beauty out of a room.

Some things haven't changed much since then, I suppose. A community driven by fear and suspicion is not a community that tends to celebrate. A community that sees people who are "different" only by their differences and not their common humanity is a community that tends to fail miserably. A community that forces itself into a pitifully narrow view of what God is capable of is a community that tends to be rather blind to many things God might be inviting us to see not only with our eyes but, more importantly, with our hearts.

Such reminds me of a verse from that old song by Gene Autry:

*I been to the doctor he says I'm alright.
I know he's lying, I'm losing my sight.
He should've examined the eyes of my mind.
20/20 vision and walkin' 'round blind.*

Friends, the irony of today's passage is that once the blind man gets healed, everyone else becomes blind to the beautiful, merciful, grace-filled thing that was just done.

How different would this passage look if the community had chosen celebration over cynicism? How different would this passage look if the community had chosen song over skepticism? How different would this passage look if the community had chosen gratitude over grumpiness?

Friends, we are sometimes slaves to our own preconceived notions of what God "should" do. We love to come up with excuses like "God shouldn't have done that because it was the Sabbath" or "that man *deserves* to be blind because he or his parents were sinners" or so on and so forth. We are sometimes victims to our own narrow-minded thinking.

The past two Sundays have presented us with stories about characters who came to expand their view about what Jesus was all about. The first was Nicodemus and the second was the woman at the well. Today, we seem to have stepped two steps forward and one step back.

However, all is not lost. The formerly blind man leaves today's passage as a new believer in Jesus, the Light of the World. And his testimony had just begun. Everyone else may have missed the mark, but the man who was healed was dead on. And what's more, what he saw in Jesus was not something that can

be seen with the eyes; otherwise, *everyone* would have fallen to their knees to worship Jesus that very moment. Instead, the formerly blind man saw with his heart something that was worth worshiping, something that was a tremendous cause for celebration. Will we join him gratitude? Will we choose to see with our hearts the beautiful savior who saves poor wretches like us? Or will we continue our petty squabbles?

Such questions are the hard work of the Season of Lent. Let us ponder them seriously and then throw our heads back with laughter at our foolish attempts to limit the grace of God.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.