

## **Lent 4A, 2017 sermon**

March 26, 2017

### **John 9:1-41**

*As he walked along, Jesus 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 worshiped him. Jesus said, "I came into this world*

*for judgment 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."*

*"As Jesus walked along, he saw a man who had been blind from birth."*

So begins a story which it takes the Gospel-writer John one whole chapter to tell. And yet it is interesting to note that not *once* in that 41-verse chapter is this man who was born blind given a name.

Storytellers and Scripture scholars alike would tell us that there is a reason for that. The man is not given a name because it is our human tendency to keep ourselves at arms' length from other people's situations, to dissect them, analyze them as something that is happening to that other person – but has no relevance to *my* life. This temptation is particularly strong when we are studying the Bible. We could take as an example the liturgy of the Stations of the Cross in which we immerse ourselves each Friday night in Lent. We can easily convince ourselves that the Way of the Cross was a path Jesus followed 2000 years ago along the streets of Jerusalem, and *not* a journey that **we**, too, must take *today*, **with** Christ. One of the forms of the Stations of the Cross that we use on Friday nights – perhaps the most popular form in print – is called "**Everyone's** Way of the Cross,"<sup>1</sup> in which Jesus refers to the reader as "my other self". The Gospel-writer John wants **us** to see this man born blind as *our* "other self", so he doesn't give the man a name. *We* are that man. (Of course, by the same token, we are **also** the unnamed Pharisees.)

The Gospel writer John, in telling this story the way he does, undoubtedly sees in this man born blind – as well as in the Pharisees – the essential human condition which Jesus has been sent to alleviate: we are **all** blind, to some extent, spiritually speaking, and Jesus has been sent into the world that we might **see**. He *is*, after all (as he himself says in today's Gospel), the Light of the world!

One of the remarkable things about today's Gospel account is that Jesus appears only at the beginning and the end of the story. During *most* of the story, Jesus is neither seen nor heard from. At the beginning of the story, Jesus restores the man's physical eyesight, and then exits the scene, leaving the man, his parents, and the Pharisees with the task of *interpreting* what that healing meant. At the center of John's story is **not** the physical healing *itself*, but its **interpretation**, what it means, what it points to. For the healing of this man born blind is one of the seven signs in John's Gospel that John uses to point to who Jesus is and to the spiritual truth he has come to reveal. The Pharisees *and* the man born blind are faced with the exact same **fact** of this man's physical cure. The question is: what will they *do* with that self-same fact? How will they interpret its meaning?

Initially, the man puts **no** interpretation on his healing. The Pharisees ask him, “How were your eyes opened?” and he responds, “He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see.” It’s all objective and matter-of-fact. Both the man and the Pharisees *could*, at **this** point, develop any *number* of interpretations or meanings to explain the objective fact of the healing. What we see happen as the story unfolds, however, is a *split* between differing interpretations of that same event. The Pharisees take a legalistic pathway, interrogating the man and his parents, trying to determine how the Law applies, like the scrupulous followers of the Law of Moses they are. The man born blind, on the other hand, does *not* begin with the written Law. Rather, he remains open to seeing the presence of God and the hand of God at work in the world; experiencing the flow of God’s Spirit acting in and through his life. Under unrelenting cross-examination, the man born blind begins to see a **spiritual** reality *beneath* the objective fact of his **physical** healing. The restoration of his *physical* sight becomes a metaphor for his growing ability to see spiritual reality with the eye of his soul. His *examiners*, on the other hand, choose to interpret the **same** factual event of his healing not in a spiritual way, but rather in an external, dualistic, legalistic, judgmental way. Fr. John Shea writes: “for these Pharisees God is *not* a flow of life into people but the maker and enforcer of laws... When God is the maker and enforcer of laws, people are either righteous or sinners.”<sup>2</sup> Jesus has violated the Sabbath by healing the man, and therefore Jesus must be a sinner. “Their theology of sin,” Fr. Shea continues, “keeps [the Pharisees] from listening to the truth the formerly blind man is telling them.”<sup>3</sup> It is a truth which doesn’t mesh with their interpretive worldview, so they do away with the whole problem by declaring Jesus a sinner and the man born blind a sinner from birth; and they cast the man out of the synagogue – a legal action which is a “solemn curse or excommunication... permanently excluding [a person] from Israel.”<sup>4</sup> No longer is he a member of his own Jewish people; no longer is he one of God’s chosen people. He has been formally and legally disowned.

Now, Bible Scholars tell us that this is exactly what had happened to the Gospel-writer John’s *own* community at the time of his writing this Gospel: **they** had been cursed and thrown out by the Pharisees of *their* day because they were followers of Jesus. Indeed, the various people in this story would have been very familiar to John’s community: Some of them, like the man’s parents in the story, didn’t want to rock the boat, for fear that they might be cast out. So they avoided confrontation with the Jewish officials who had the power to excommunicate them. Others, like the man born blind, were courageous enough to stand fast in their faith in Christ, and they **had**, in fact, been excommunicated. It is clear that John wants this story to encourage the members of his community to trust the spiritual sight that they have been given, trust the eye of their soul, trust that the Risen Christ to whom they’ve given their lives truly **is** the Light of the world, and therefore excommunication should not be feared.

My friends, each day you and I are presented with people, events, and encounters that can be interpreted in a number of ways. We can look at them and interpret

them through the eye of our mind – which often judges, distinguishes, labels, and critiques. It is a dualistic way of seeing; a restricted, somewhat closed and legalistic approach to the world. As was true with the Pharisees, when **our** God is the maker and enforcer of laws, we tend to see people as either righteous or sinners, good or bad, worthy or unworthy, saved or unsaved, reputable or disreputable, etc. Then we take action on those judgments by excluding, denigrating, vilifying, banning, belittling, rejecting, and even excommunicating.

But we can also see and interpret people, events, and encounters by a different pathway, the pathway the man born blind takes in our Gospel, seeing with the eye of the soul, which beholds the same events, people, and data as everyone else does, but interprets them from a viewpoint which is more open, receptive, forgiving – what St. Paul calls “the mind of Christ.” When God is the maker and enforcer of laws, people are either righteous or sinners. But when God is the one who heals the broken, gives sight to the blind, feeds the hungry, welcomes the stranger – and does so on the Sabbath day, breaking the Law – then the labels of “righteous” and “sinner” fade away, for **all** are beloved, accepted, forgiven, treasured.

Neither the man born blind nor the Pharisees in our Gospel story are given names, for they are both potentially you and I. So the question for **us** is: Which pathway do you and I take in seeing and interpreting the events, people, and encounters of our lives? The pathway of the Pharisees, who, seeing only with the eye of the flesh and the eye of the mind, interpret the world in a dualistic way – in or out, good or bad, right or wrong, for or against, us vs. them – and then excommunicating, or banning, or denigrating, or disowning “them”? **Or**, do you and I follow the pathway of the man born blind, who gradually but clearly comes to see and interpret everything *through* the eye of his soul, *in* the mind of Christ, and *by* the Light of the World, courageously **allowing** himself to be denigrated, vilified, judged, even excommunicated for the very *reason* that he sees and interprets the world *in* the mind of – and *by* the Light of – Christ?

My friends, I fervently believe it is the mission of the Church in the midst of a culture which sees everything dualistically: in or out, good or bad, right or wrong, for or against, us vs. them, it is the mission of the Church – **our** mission! – to see and interpret the world through the eye of the soul and with the mind of Christ, refusing to enter into the Pharisaic game of denigrating, vilifying, banning, disowning, excommunicating.

St. Paul described this Christ-like way of seeing and interpreting the world when he wrote to the Colossians: “Words like Jewish and non-Jewish, religious and irreligious, insider and outsider, uncivilized and uncouth, slave and free, mean nothing. From now on **everyone** is defined by Christ, everyone is **included** *in* Christ.” (Colossians 3:11, *The Message*)

That is our mission: to see and interpret the world through the eye of the soul wherein *everyone* is **included** in Christ – and then to help *others* to see, and act accordingly.

AMEN

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.amazon.com/Everyones-Way-Cross-Clarence-Enzler/dp/1594714304>

<sup>2</sup> John Shea, *On Earth as it is in Heaven*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004, p. 133

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 137

<sup>4</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John (I-XII)*, *The Anchor Bible* series Volume 29, New York: Doubleday, 1966, p. 374