

4th Sunday in Lent. John 9:1-41

My favorite job I ever had was working for the summer program at the preschool my daughters attended. This was a summer in Maine so it was a mix of really hot sticky weather and intense downpour rainstorms. Every time it rained the kids would be sad that they had to come inside, but when the sun came back out, it was their happiest time because they got to go play in the mud. Then when they were completely filthy we would turn the hose on and wash them clean. The kids never knew how dirty they were until we washed them!

Today's gospel story features Jesus playing in the mud, and lots of folks who, just like preschoolers, didn't realize how much of a mess they were. It's a story of the blind who can see clearly, and of those who claim clear vision but are really blind. In our reading, we hear that Jesus was walking along when he sees a man born blind, a man we later find out is a beggar. Jesus' disciples ask if this man is blind because he is a sinner or, is he blind because his parents are sinners.

That's a lot of judgment from the disciples right off the bat. They equate the blindness of the man with sin, his sin, or others' sin. They literally judge his soul from the outside. Jesus quickly squishes their prejudice about this man; saying that he wasn't born blind because of sin but so that good can be worked in his life. And from this good, all might know that Jesus is the light of the world. This truth is not revealed through the disciples who have followed him, nor through the Pharisees, the wise leaders of the people that we meet in this story but to a blind beggar to whom the light truly comes.

Jesus heals this man by making mud, rubbing it on his face, and then sending him off for a wash in the pool appropriately called sent, where his sight returns to him. The man then comes back to his village and everyone is shocked that he can see. Just like the disciples, the people around this beggar had been blaming him, or maybe his parents for his condition. We too often do this ourselves, "Isn't it a shame his parents don't take better care of him". "She's really let herself go." "You know, you can't help them if they won't even try to help themselves." We too judge others for their suffering.

So when news gets around this village the Pharisees come to see the man who was blind. They question him and when they discover that Jesus healed him on a Sabbath some become outraged, while others remain impressed that Jesus had performed a miracle. So they ask the man what he thinks. Just like my preschoolers, he comes right to the point, cutting through all the debate, and says that Jesus must be “a prophet”. But the Pharisees are not satisfied, they keep debating. This is actually one of the greatest things about Jewish scholars, they sometimes hold diametrically opposed views on something and yet they keep talking to each other. They even worship as one community while in the middle of these divisions.

Anyway, the Pharisees looked deeper, and interviewed the man's parents for further clarity. The formally blind man's parents admit that he is their blind son, but refuse to say how he gained his sight for fear of what would happen if they admitted to Jesus being the Messiah. They were blinded to the truth of who Jesus is by fear for themselves and their standing in the village; thinking it was better for people to consider them sinners for their son's blindness than risk being ostracized for owning the implications of his healing. We too are often shy about admitting to Jesus' place in our lives, as if our faith in him is something to be ashamed of.

So the Pharisees still not stratified go back to the man born blind who again tells his story. The man is a little surprised at this interest and asks them if they keep coming back to him because they want to be Jesus' disciples. The Pharisees now start to get angry. They were secure in their own knowledgeable interpretation of scripture! In their anger, they accused Jesus and the blind man both of being sinners for daring to question them. The man is now truly astonished, how could this Jesus be a sinner since he healed a blind man? And the anger of the Pharisees turned to prideful vengeance and they kicked the man right out of the synagogue.

When Jesus hears what has happened he returns to the man and asks if he believes in the “Son of Man”, one of Jesus' many titles in John's gospel. The man is delighted to believe in whatever Jesus shows him. Jesus gave him sight and now he wants to follow him saying “Lord I believe”. And Jesus tells the man that he had come “...into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.”

This saying is the heart of the whole story, Jesus is the light of the world and it's a light the blind can see and the wise and holy are blinded by. Only those who are humbled by their infirmities and are willing to bow their hearts to be healed can glimpse this light, while those who with pride stare straight into the light, are blinded by its brightness.

The Pharisees, who like the mean girls in school always seem to be hanging around when something goes down, helpfully chip in and give Jesus an opportunity to illuminate his meaning. One of them speaks out with a good rhetorical question "Surely we are not blind, are we?" And Jesus takes the question at face value. "If you hadn't said you could see, you won't be blind now. But since you claim you have such great sight, you are stuck in sin." All through this story, people have mistaken blindness for sin. Blinded by this prejudice they have missed that insight *is* true seeing.

Jesus has insight, seeing what others don't. Seeing that mud on the outside doesn't make the inside dirty. The wise have learned themselves right into a corner where their wisdom and debating have obscured what they set out to find, the presence of God in their midst. Like Samual in our old testament reading they look to the outside of those before them trying to find the promise of God and miss the fact that God is in the back 40 with the sheep boy. And we are no better than these blind Pharisees or the mistaken old Samual.

We think that we live in a more enlightened age, one that has progressed beyond darkness and into the hope of modernity. We have learned, and debated, and spent our way into thinking that we are clean of almost all wrongdoing. Yet we can't see the mud on our faces and we judge those who are not able to live up to our standards of modern perfection. We hate the poor for not working hard enough. We blame the sick for reminding us of our mortality. And we seek to litigate our way out of prejudice, misogyny, and racism, rather than doing the hard work of examining our own consciences. We have been playing in the mud of judging others, and we are as filthy as unwashed preschoolers. Our dwelling in a self-righteous culture of law has put this blinding mud on us. Yet we are called to dwell in the light, called by someone who put mud on us so we can be washed.

Dwelling in the light of Jesus means turning from our pride. If you think you are smart enough to stare right at the sun, you're going to go blind, just as surely as you will see the sun's glory if you humbly look away from it at what it illuminates. When we walk with Jesus all encounters with suffering become an opportunity to humbly be present with those God is shining a light upon. If we come casting our shadow of judgment upon those we meet, we lose the opportunity to see God's mighty works revealed in them.

When we know Jesus walks with us, illuminating the way, we do not need to judge or fear. Even the darkness of facing death becomes light when we can see who walks that road with us. All we need to do is step into the light of faithfully loving the world Jesus illuminates. So my brothers and sisters this lent God calls to us saying:

“Sleepers, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine upon you.”