

A Lent 4 3.19.23

John 9:1-41

Focus statement: Jesus sees us

I read this week about one of the heresies of the early church. A heresy, in case you're unfamiliar with the term, is a belief that contradicts the established church beliefs. Arguing about heresy and calling those who disagreed with them heretics was a popular activity of the early church, so we spent a lot of time in seminary church history class learning about them. So while I must have learned about this one, I didn't remember it. Likely because this would not have been a heresy I would be tempted by. The heresy was called Donatism, and it held that the sacraments only worked, for lack of a better word, if the priest presiding over them was sinless. This heresy obviously didn't have much lasting power as even by early church standards it quickly became apparent that if only the sinless could preside over the sacraments, no one was going to be able to preside over the sacraments. Every time you have ever received communion; you have received it from the hands of a sinner. In about a half an hour or so, you will again receive communion from the hands of a sinner. Unless Jesus himself presided at the table, a thing which only happened one time a little over two thousand years ago, every other sharing of the Eucharist came through a sinner's hands. Baptism is even more fraught. Jesus himself didn't baptize, so every person who has ever been baptized, including Jesus, was baptized by a sinner.

Sin and sinners are all around us. It is the human condition. So you'd think we'd be, not accepting of it, I'm not going to go with the whole anything goes heresy, but at least used to it. And yet, our Gospel text this morning is a story of an incredible miracle, that almost gets lost in everyone grumping about sin.

Let's walk through this. Jesus was walking along with his disciples when he came across a man blind from birth. And when Jesus' disciples see the man, their first question is "Rabbi, who sinned... that this man was born blind?" Who sinned? Seriously? Seriously that is your first question? Nothing about who the man is, what his name might be—which, we never learn his name, if Jesus could heal him, if the man was even in need of healing. No, nothing about the man, his condition, his needs. The disciples jump straight to the question of who's fault is this. Who sinned.

Allowing the disciples their historical context, we can give them a bit of a break here. In the ancient times, illness, injury, tragedies of all sorts, were frequently chalked up to having angered or upset whoever the reigning deity was. While the God of Israel has always been a God of mercy not retribution, that cultural expectation of blame was still present. Jesus was quick to correct their error. No one sinned, "neither this man or his parents, that he was born blind." Blindness for this man was nothing more than a description, it was the way he happened to be born.

No one sinned that this man was born blind, but sin certainly played a role in this story, sin that we see start to reveal itself immediately after, in what is for John's Gospel a pretty unremarkable miraculous healing, Jesus told the man to wash in the pool of Siloam, after which the man immediately received his sight. When the man returned to his neighborhood with sight, we learn a new characteristic about the man born blind, he was a beggar. And immediately all the people who've known him as the blind beggar all his life

begin to question, are you the same man, how can you now see? They brought the man to the Pharisees who too question the man, but wait, it's the sabbath. Healing isn't allowed on the sabbath, so surely this act, and the man who performed it cannot be from God. They go and get the man's parents, is this your son who was blind, how is it that he can see? But his parents were afraid of the Pharisees, so they turn their back on their son, I don't know, he's a grown-up, ask him. So they bring the man back before the Pharisees again, who is this sinner who had the audacity to heal you on the sabbath? By the end of this whole back and forth, the Pharisees become so frustrated that they drove the man out of the community.

Here, people of God, is the sin in the story. Not that the man was born blind. Not that Jesus healed on a day when he was supposed to be resting. The real sin in this story is the way all the people around this man were unwilling, afraid even, to let the man born blind grow and change, to alter their understanding of him to fit who he was becoming.

I was listening to the Hidden Brain podcast this week. Hidden Brain, if you're looking for a good listen, is a weekly podcast about the habits and practices in our brains that underline how we move through the world that we are often entirely unaware of. This particular episode was about unconscious bias, about how we form opinions about others instantaneously, without even being aware we've done it. We do this in a thousand different ways. Race, gender, physical attractiveness, disability, weight, even height. All things being equal, the taller person is more likely to be hired as a bank teller, even though tallness is in no way a necessary attribute of being able to run a computer. Now, to be clear, I don't think implicit bias is a sin. It is something all of us have, all of us do, unconsciously.

It probably even has some evolutionary benefit, when our ancient ancestors were roaming wild on the savannah, and the ability to categorize quickly helped us tell who was part of our community and who was not. Sin comes in when these judgments and biases are revealed to us, when we are told or shown their errors, and instead of correcting our mistakes we, like the people in the man's community, bury our heads in the sand, refuse to acknowledge we might have been wrong, and continue to live in our closed in worldview.

We do this to others, but honestly friends, I think we do this to ourselves a lot too. We sell ourselves short, imagine less than we are capable of, think we cannot do, act, be, in all the ways God has called us to live and work and bring the Kingdom of God around us. We drive ourselves and others away, afraid to face the wonder of who God is creating us to be.

Which gets us back to the man born blind, now seeing, and cast out of the community.

"When Jesus heard that they had driven him out," he found the man and said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man." And right here in the man's response I think we see the real miracle, the real healing in the story. Not that the man could see physically with his eyes, but that in regaining his sight and in all he had gone through, he had had revealed to him all that he did not yet know. In a story of uncertainties and unknowns, the man asked Jesus the most authentic question of the entire incident, "And who is he, sir. Tell me, so that I may believe in him." I don't know, the man told Jesus. I don't know, but I want to learn. I want to grow, I want to have my mind opened, my heart expanded. The healing in this story isn't about a man who was blind and then could see. The healing in this story is a man who,

through no fault of his own, was put in a place and a role by his community, until Jesus came along and told him he could be more.

Dear people of God, at the end of the day the story of the healing of the man born blind is not about seeing at all, not in the physical sense at least, not with your eyes. The story of the healing of the man born blind is about relationship. It is about a God who truly saw, again not with the eyes but with the heart, all that this man could be, and showed him how to see it in himself. In this case, the man received physical sight in the deal, but that was not the real transformation. The real transformation was in the relationship between Jesus and the man, and how that relationship shaped everything about him.

Jesus saw, really saw, the man born blind. Saw him as more than a beggar. Saw him as a child of God, as a fellow laborer in the Kingdom, as someone who could be more than the limited role he and his community had placed around him. Jesus saw the man born blind, and Jesus see us. This is both the great joy and the great terror in this text. Jesus sees you, really sees you. Not like I see you, not even like you see yourself, but sees you. Knows your struggles and challenges, your hopes and dreams, the limits you place on yourself and those others have placed on you. Jesus sees you, he knows you, and he knows you are so much more than you know. My prayer for you in this passage, is that you, like the man born blind, can come to see yourself the way Jesus sees you. That you might come to live as the person Jesus knows you to be. This process of growth will not be easy. Others may chaff against the changes God is making in your life, want you to fit back in the nice, neat box they imagine for you. But know this, dear people of God. You are seen, and known, and loved by

God. Exactly who you are, exactly as you are. Who you are, however, may be so much more than you know. Thanks be to God. Amen.