

A Lent 4 3.22.20

John 9:1-41

Focus Statement: Jesus is the worst at social distancing and it's ok to have no idea what's going on.

So what I've taken from the texts both last week and today is that Jesus is just the worst at social distancing. Like, he's super bad at staying six feet away from people, avoiding crowds, and especially avoiding physical contact. Last week we heard about how the woman went to the well at noon to avoid the crowds in the morning and the evening, only to find Jesus waiting for her. Picture Jesus during the 7 am to 8 am seniors only hour at Meijer's, camped out in front of the giant pallet of toilet paper, waiting for someone to come help him reach the top shelf. Then today he goes and breaks all the social taboos with this one. What are the two things we are the most not supposed to do during the pandemic? Shake hands and touch our faces, right. So what does Jesus do in this passage? He goes up to this poor unsuspecting fellow, makes mud from his own spit, and rubs it in the guy's eyes. This guy didn't ask Jesus for healing, doesn't talk at all until verse eleven, and remember, is blind, so may not even have known that Jesus was coming at him with the spit-mud. Now, I know that the first century had a different understanding of germ theory than we have now, but I feel like even then rubbing spit-mud in people's eyes was considered kind of gross. But that's Jesus for us. Jesus has no good social distancing habits. And this, in this weird and surreal period where we're supposed to stay at least six feet from one another, is the first and maybe best good news for us in this text. Jesus is the absolute worst at social distancing. Jesus is right up in your life, in your world, in your space right now. Things feel distant and out of control. We can't go to church; we can't do the things we normally do to find rest and fulfillment. But Jesus doesn't care. Jesus has

never cared. I'm in the sanctuary because it seems like it is comforting for you to get to at least see the sanctuary while we worship, but Jesus isn't stuck in here with me. Jesus is with you, wherever you're watching this. And Jesus, as we see with his treatment of the man born blind, isn't asking for permission first to be in your life, to heal you, to be with you. Jesus is more of a "sin boldly" sort of a fellow, he acts and then waits for us to come along behind as we'll see in the unfolding of this passage.

So, to the passage. I learned a thing this week that changed my whole read not just of the passage, but of suffering as a concept. If you've got the passage in front of you, I want you to take a look at verse three. "Jesus answered, 'neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's work might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me.'" What I learned this week is that the translators stuck extra words in here. I actually made a visual here so you can hopefully track where I'm a little easier. So here's the verse as it shows up in most English translations. But the words I have here in red, "he was born blind," those are not actually in the original Greek. The Greek actually reads like this, "neither this man nor his parents sinned." Period. New sentence. "So that God's work might be revealed in him, we must work the works of him who sent me." Why is this important? It's important because sometimes we humans try too hard to find lessons in suffering. Sometimes our own, but often other peoples suffering. So it's important to remember that this man's life was not an object lesson. God did not subject this man to decades of poverty. Because poverty really was what the man's problem was, not his blindness. His blindness led to his poverty, but poverty was the real source of suffering. God did not subject this man to decades of poverty so that one day Jesus would

come along and perform a miracle. The message of this passage is not that God causes suffering so that Jesus can one day relieve it. The message is that there is suffering. There is suffering, and when Jesus encounters it, he finds a way to transform it, to use it, to work with it to make a whole new thing. This is a pretty bad analogy but we'll go with it, it's like Jesus upcycles suffering. He mucks his way into the junk of the world and finds a way to bring goodness from it. The work of God is to go to where there is suffering and reveal God's glory, and this is the work that we too are called, empowered, freed to do.

And our man born blind is suddenly able to see. He doesn't know how this happened, doesn't know who Jesus is, doesn't know what this means. So he stutters out this strange reply, "The man called Jesus made mud... Then I went and washed and received my sight.' They said to him, 'Where is he?' He said, 'I don't know.'"

And the Pharisees are not having that for a response. Thus begins this back and forth between the man and the Pharisees, the man's parents and the Pharisees, the man and the Pharisees again. Then Jesus and the man, then Jesus and the Pharisees. And in each of these conversations, we see the man whom Jesus changed coming into a deeper knowledge of who Jesus truly is, of what had truly taken place. This knowledge shifts from, "the man called Jesus" to "he is a prophet" to "If [Jesus] was not from God, he could do nothing" to "tell me [who is the Son of Man] so that I may worship him." And finally, after a miraculous healing, four conversations, and nearly forty verses, to this full confession of faith, "Lord, I believe." This shift in the experience of the man is a shift not of head knowledge but of heart knowledge. He experienced not just a miraculous healing, but he experienced a

Messiah who stuck with him, who sought him out when others had cast him aside, and who pursued him persistently.

And I love that what theologians assert to be the full confession of faith is so simple, “Lord, I believe.” Because think about it, believe what? “Lord, I believe” isn’t a statement of great intellectual definition. It leaves open a whole lot of questions of what that belief is. Believe probably isn’t even the best translation here, though I know why the translators went with it, because it comes the closest to encapsulating the meaning. But the feeling is more, “Lord, I trust.” I trust without really knowing where that trust lies, I trust without a full understanding of what that means. But I trust in this relationship, in this experience of your presence, and that trust brings comfort amidst all the unknowns.

And then we have the Pharisees, and the great rhetorical question of the age. “Some of the Pharisees near [Jesus]... 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.” The question the Pharisees ask here is a question not about sight or even about believing, it is a question about judgment. Jesus had just spoken about his role as judge, and the Pharisees immediately go on the defense, surely we are above your judgement.

The reason the Pharisees assume they are above judgment is because they are quite confident they have all the answers. They know all the rules, they follow all the regulations, they do all the right things, hang out with all the right people, pray in all the right ways.

They’re set. The point being made here with the man born blind and the Pharisees is that

the problem isn't seeing or not seeing, it isn't even believing or not believing. The problem is with thinking you know all the things and have all the answers. Faith is knowing you don't know, and trusting that it's ok not to know, because God knows. God knows this, God knows you, and God knows, God loves, God's world.

So friends, here's real talk with Pastor Kjersten to end this thing up. I don't know how to do this thing either. I don't know how we're supposed to be church in this time. I don't know how to keep people safe. I don't know how to connect. You see my smiling face on the video a couple times a week, you don't see the many hours of Project Runway Travis has been forced to suffer through because it's the only thing my brain can handle. I'm, maybe foolishly, not super worried about my health, because I'm in the lowest risk demographic, but I worry about yours. I worry about our economy, I worry about our neighbors who run local small businesses, I worry about the work load of our doctors and nurses, OTs and PTs and med techs, janitors and cafeteria workers, and grocers and police and politicians and everyone trying to keep the basic services met. And I worry like heck about all the members of the Co-op, trying to navigate a world that is already impossible to navigate with no safety net in place. I worry about what the world will look like in a couple months, when we've crawled our way out of this and have to rebuild from the rubble.

So yeah, I'm scared too. And I'd be lying if I told you what the world, what the church is going to look like in a couple months, or even next week. But here's what I do believe. What I know not in the way that the Pharisees knew, because their research, their study, their intellectual ponderings told them. But what I know in the same way the man born

blind believed, trusted, from his own experience. Here's what I know not because I have a Master of Divinity, or I can read some dead languages, or I've studied it, but what I know with my heart, what I know from my own experience of who God is and how God works. I know that while God did not cause this, God is in the midst of this, transforming it and us and this world from within. I know that God is finding a way to reveal Godself to us in a million ways. I also know that it is ok not to know. It is ok to just be in the midst of our world for a time. To embrace the model of the man born blind and lean not on heads, but on our hearts. To say in the midst of all I cannot know, I can trust in the experience I have had in the past, I can trust in the stories I read in the Bible, I can trust in the comfort I have felt in the community of the faithful, and I can know that hope always comes after despair and resurrection always come after death. So dear people of God, be gentle with yourselves in these wilderness days. Be ok not being ok. We don't have to have all the answers, or see all the blessings, or have all the right believings. God's not going anywhere. And Jesus, as we've seen the last couple of weeks, is the absolute worst at social distancing. So you can't shake him if you tried. But don't put spit mud in people's eyes, even if they are people you're social distancing with. That's just gross all the time. Be well. Amen.