**Sermon for MARCH 19, 2023 John 9:1-41 “Seeing Sin and Salvation””**

As Jesus 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 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.”

Here we are, the fourth Sunday in Lent. The days outside may be brightening, but the mood within is deepening, as these stories of Jesus draw him ever closer to Jerusalem and the inevitable pain and horror that await him there. Today’s tale happens along that fateful route that will lead him to the confrontation that will reverberate throughout all of history.

It begins like so many things do, when folks are just walking and talking, and especially if someone in the party is learned or wise. The travelers happen across the path of a blind beggar, whose defenseless nature makes him more riveting than the everyday beggars that don’t even get mentioned. And one of the disciples, possibly trying for brownie points, asks a theological question: whose fault is this blindness? Is it his fault, or his parent’s fault? Oy, this is an old, *old* human category, isn’t it, this need to assign blame, and the reasoning is that, if something is awfully wrong, then somebody must have done something awfully bad to deserve it. In the dualistic worldview of the first century, everything happens for a divine reason, and they want Jesus’ opinion of why God is punishing this particular man with blindness.

I am sure that his answer surprised them greatly; he retorts that nobody did anything wrong to deserve this, but rather that this one is here, now, so that the glory of God’s healing power might be revealed. It is a line of reasoning that does not sit well with many folks, that some of us are mere pawns in the unfolding game of grace and redemption. We hear this kind of thing to this day, that the death of this ailing child was God’s will so that the parent’s marriage might be strengthened, or that this mentally challenged child was born that way in order to improve the quality of care offered by those who would love her. It makes us uneasy, always…but Jesus, master storyteller, wants his listeners a bit off balance. He needs them, and us, to be open to new interpretations and ways of thinking. The disciples present their wisdom: one of these two scenarios is the truth, period. But Jesus suggests a greater truth, a broader explanation, and it tangles them up a bit, in feelings and thoughts that we usually repress. So far, so good.

One thing Jesus surely isn’t is a braggart, so when he suggests that this man is here to demonstrate God’s glory, he gets right to proving it. We know by now that no mud, no spittle, and no ocular massage are needed for Jesus to effect healing, but he knows the man will be questioned about it later, and so he equips him with a story. Plus, the value of therapeutic touch cannot be overestimated, even if it involves the application of mud to one’s eyes and a trip to the local spring…sounds kind of like a rudimentary spa experience, doesn’t it? So off the man goes, no more impaired than usual by the mud, but after washing, he can see! He can see! And folks notice right away that this formerly blind guy is now ambulating with great abandon and confidence. They cannot believe it, and the theme of this story begins, where they search for every possible explanation except the simple, straightforward one that is literally staring them in the face.

The neighbors are not alone in this tangling dance of confusion; the Pharisees, keepers of the law, knowers of all things holy, have set their sights on taking this Jesus to task. He keeps doing these *outrageous* things, healing and feeding and instilling hope, and they don’t know *how*, and he claims that it is not even him, but the power of God at work. They cannot be expected to take him seriously, dusty and calloused from work and travel, surrounded by raw fishermen and crowds of itinerant who- knows- whats. If he were a law keeper, he would not heal, let alone on the Sabbath! And here we go again, seeking every possible explanation for the events of that day except the obvious one. And like the disciples, he has the Pharisees off balance too; some of them are just outraged at what he is doing, but others overlook that to ponder how on earth he is doing it, and can come to no conclusion that does not involve the actual power of God at work. They examine the until-recently-blind man; they drag in his aged parents; they harass the man a second time, pushing, probing, angling to get the answer they want, the answer that will justify the malice they intend for this upstart preacher. But try as they might, they cannot cajole the answer they want from this simple, straightforward, grateful man. And then, when he has the temerity to suggest that the only plausible answer *is* the obvious one, that he is, in fact, telling the truth and that Jesus is, in fact, a healer sent from God, they just go ballistic. Who are you to lecture us on the things of divinity? And they toss him right out the door.

Here is where the story, up to this point more of a tedious court reporter’s transcription than a story, gets personal and interesting. I hope you noticed the patronizing tone and the superfluous detail, like you were explain things to a wee child. Jesus has no patience with these posers, but he has infinite patience with those who seek the light. And now a hand is outstretched to lift up the dusty, exhausted, harassed man from out the dust, and that hand belongs to Jesus. In simple terms, he asks the man if he believes that what has happened to him is from God. In simpler terms, the man confirms his impression that Jesus is the god-bearer, and then worships him, right then, right there. And thus the stage is set for John’s searing indictment of most of humanity: we see, but we do not perceive. We are unwilling, unable, unrelenting in our ability to give credit outside of our awareness. We are poor at offering grace, and often just as poor at accepting it. And so, we find ourselves lumped in with the Pharisees, who have all of the “right” answers, yet precious few of the important answers.

What is needful here? I don’t wanna be in *that* group, do you? What is needful, I think, is that we develop the ability to see through our sinfulness. We must develop the ability to part with our socially-installed habits of averting the eyes of our heart. We develop that ability, intentionally, deliberately, purposefully, as we acquire the skills of self- assessment and accountability. These skills are at odds with the usual human skills designed to protect our status quo as fallen and imperfect ones: skills like judging others and dodging blame. Rationalize at all costs, find some reason, any reason, just so I, me, myself, am not at fault. It is an old, old human song, my friends, but not a great song, kind of annoying and limiting. There is so much more to life than just avoiding it!

When we develop the ability to see through our sinfulness, to accept the truth of who we are and what we have done with our lives, a new level of vision will be ours. Instead of shunning spiritual things as too mysterious or too hard, we will gently open to them, simply, like the man wandering to the pool for cleansing. It is, after all, the fourth Sunday in Lent, and time marches on. No more time for muddy eyes, then, for unclear vision and self- limited scope! The time for healing is upon us. The time for vision is upon us. The time of our wholeness is ready when we are. Amen.