

Fourth Sunday in Lent, Year A

March 22, 2020

Children's sermon:

Before we read our Gospel this morning I have an activity for all the children of God -- but especially the younger ones listening.

I want you to think about your week, and later after this broadcast talk with your family about your senses and what you have noticed.

Have you noticed that we are using our sense of touch differently? Or our sense of smell? Right now we are all relying a lot on our sense of hearing, and we are about to hear a story about a man who was born blind, so he had to rely on his senses other than seeing a lot.

We're going to hear about what happens when Jesus sees this man, and I'd like you to listen to it this morning as if you were the blind man. When you hear me mention him in the story for the first time, close your eyes. And when you hear that he is able to see for the first time, open your eyes. And in between, think about what the blind man was able to notice and experience, and when it was he was able to see.

## The Holy Gospel according to John, the 9th chapter

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 neighbours 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.'

Beloved of God, grace and peace wherever this morning finds you:

There has maybe never been a time when we are so aware of our senses.

It started with **touch**, as over the past weeks we have been told to wash our hands and to avoid hugs and hand to hand contact. And now to keep our distance altogether from the bodies of people other than our own families.

Some people whose whole careers depend on touching other people have seen their work suspended. And others who provide our basic needs like health care or groceries have seen their work become a lot more dangerous.

We need touch -- week our knitters closet was nearly emptied because we were desperate for some way that all who are sequestered in nursing homes could actually hold and feel some sign of our love for them.

And then there's **taste**. Under the stress of this time and all this staying home, I don't know about you, but I've never been more grateful for the taste of food. All of us seem to be thinking more than ever about our next meal. Some us us are hungry from stress and others are truly worried about feeding their families.

As the days wear on and it hasn't been warm enough to fling the windows open and all bodies in the family are home, well, my **sense of smell** is a little heightened too, and not in a good way.

What would we do without **hearing**? I've never been more grateful that I am an audio-centric person. Hearing my loved ones' voices, listening to music, the wealth of podcasts available to pass the time. I need the sound of other people's voices more than ever.

But there's no denying that this time makes us realize that **seeing** each other is so, so important. No email can ever convey what we can take in when we lay eyes on someone. We are all having to adjust to seeing one another through video calls or talking at the long end of your dog's leash. There are stories of loved ones going outside the windows of nursing home rooms just to wave and see their beloved's face.

Seeing is so important to us that we use it as a metaphor for being connected even when we aren't actually seeing. I've been struck by how many of my favorite radio shows and podcasts will say something like "We'll see you tomorrow." Which

isn't true at all. Even if they did know whether I'd be there to listen to tomorrow, I won't SEE them with my eyes, and they won't see me. In fact they will probably never know what I look like. But we speak of this connection we have with the sense of sight as if that's all there is.

The Bible uses the sense of sight constantly as a metaphor for knowledge. It's a sensitive thing. One woman who lost her sight to macular degeneration said to me once "I'm getting really tired of being a metaphor for spiritual sickness." Because the physically blind are not any less wise or perceptive or spiritually advanced than anyone else, but the metaphor of blindness comes up an awful lot in the Bible. When someone is healed of blindness it's a sign that God has restored them to community, to connection.

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In this morning's healing of the man born blind, it's more obvious than usual that spiritual blindness really has nothing to do with your physical ability. As it turns out, Jesus' healing of this blind man becomes the occasion for pointing out how much some very physically able people refuse to SEE who he is. The text doesn't even name him, which seems like a problem because the text calls us to see that he is a real person. So let's call him Jacob.

First, it becomes obvious that they haven't seen Jacob. He's just the blind beggar, and as the disciples walk by their question is a question about him as a theological problem. Who sinned? This man, or his parents?

They talk about him, not to him. They have no interest at all in his story or asking him about it. He's just the occasion for an object lesson with their teacher.

But Jesus dismisses the either/or. No one sinned to cause his blindness. He is here so that God's works might be revealed in him.

What if that were the answer to all our questions about the condition we find ourselves in-- how can God's works be revealed in this?

Jacob feels hears Jesus voice. He hears maybe an alarming sound of spitting and Jesus leaning down to the mud, and then he feels this mud on his eyes, and hears a command -- go and wash.

Only later when the crowds are gone and he washes up does he see, for the first time in his life

After he is healed, it becomes clear that no one had actually ever looked at him enough to know him. He was just “the blind guy,” that beggar we walk by. As soon as he can see physically, no one is really sure who they are looking at. And the rest of the chapter is all about how impossibly hard the Pharisees work to NOT see what is right in front of them, the glory of God.

How often do our physical eyes deceive us?

[Sam Wells tells the](#) story of taking a class of eager college students to a local social enterprise near Duke University.

“I was met at the door by a neatly dressed man, the kind of person who takes a role on the board of a charity because his career peaks before he’s 50 so he decides to take a salary cut and give something back. We were in a compound where all the residents were addicts, combining steady work with participation in a 12-step program.”

They get a tour and hear from one of the residents who tells her personal story of hitting rock bottom and gradually experiencing healing as she dried out and then entered the program offered there of recovery and work.

Finally Wells asked their guide what had motivated him to be part of this work:

“Oh,” he said. “I wondered if anyone would ask about me. I was like you guys. I was at college. I used to drink a lot, like people do at college. Except, when we all left, and the others stopped, I didn’t stop. I went the other way. I drank more. ... I lost all my friends long ago.

“You probably think I run this place, or sit on the board. I don’t. I live here. I’m nearly done with my two years. It’s true I help with the accounts here, and some of the management systems, and they wheel me out to speak to guys like you because I don’t seem so threatening. But don’t get me wrong. I’m an alcoholic. I’m what some of you guys could become if you don’t get a measure of yourselves. Don’t be fooled. I can wear your clothes and walk like you. Maybe in a few weeks I could be living next door to you. But I’m your worst nightmare of your own future.”

Wells writes: “The color drained out of the faces of every person in the room. ...It was like the oxygen had evaporated and we were all gasping for breath.

“But none more than me. I was the teacher. I’d taken the students to learn how to live tidy lives and still give back. But this man blew apart any notion I retained that social engagement involved the abundant reaching out to the needy. He was both— us and them. He was the incarnation of deprivation, taking on the robes of comfort. There is no tidy. The truth only appears when you see beyond appearances. What a mess. What glory.”

If there is any grace in this time, it might be that we are beginning to see people we do not usually see. The cashier at the grocery store is not just a blank cipher – they are an hourly employee who needs the work and who also has to know that every time they touch all these things that have been touched by others, they are at risk of disease. The hair dressers and nail salon folks and waiters and dishwashers who were suddenly without work this week – they are vast parts of our community and when they do not have work, we all feel the pinch.

The rest of John chapter 9 is about how the Pharisees refuse to see what is before them – which is not only Jacob but also Jesus.

Finally Jesus seeks the healed man out, and though Jacob has never seen Jesus’ face before, he knows who this is -- the son of Man, his healer, his savior. He heard his shepherd’s voice, and he knows that goodness and mercy will keep pursuing him.

Brothers and sisters, if there’s one thing none of us can see now, it is the future.

And it is frustrating not to see your faces as I preach this morning, or to know what to say about the vast foggy mist that lies in front of us.

We don’t know how long this will last. We don’t know how deep the economic pain will go; we don’t know how many of our families will be infected. We don’t know how many of the losses we feel now will turn out to be permanent.

We do not know what exactly will bring the end of this time of physical distancing: a medical breakthrough, a change in the curve of infections, a better way to know who is immune.

But we also don’t know what other kinds of healing might come through this time: as artists post their work for the world to see and neighbors start talking to each other in new ways and faith communities figure out new ways to support not only the people who show up but the ones who can’t show up.

A lot of people are out of work – from professional athletes to part-time bartenders. But one thing is clear – in this moment we have an opportunity to actually start seeing each other. Don't be fooled. We are all blind; or as Luther said on his deathbed, we are beggars, all of us.

But here's one thing we do know – we know Jesus.

We have tasted and seen that he is good at this table. And some day we will again

We have seen his presence in one another, not only in our strength and serving but also in the ways we suffer together as a body of Christ.

And most of all, we have heard and can still hear his voice. The means of grace are multiple, and they come through God's word, which thanks be to God can still come as we listen to Scripture together, as we offer words of encouragement and consolation to each other, as we remember that forgiveness and grace do not require physical eyes or hands-on presence or even bread and wine. These signs will be there for us again.

But for now we hear our shepherd's voice. And we can be that voice to each other.

I'm praying desperately for the healing of the sick, and the protection of the healers, and a vaccine, please God, a vaccine at miraculous speeds.

But let us also pray for our own vision in these times, that we seen that we are all beggars, beggars in whom the works of God can be revealed .