

St. Columba's Episcopal Church  
March 19, 2023 – The Fourth Sunday of Lent  
John 9:1-41 – Jesus and the Man Born Blind  
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This account from the Gospel of John of Jesus healing the man born blind is much more than a description of a healing miracle. It is that, but the author of the Gospel also uses this event to talk about blindness in a much wider context than physical blindness. It seems that most of the characters in this drama are blind in some way – everyone, in fact, except Jesus.

The man healed by Jesus was, obviously, physically blind.

The disciples, in their wondering who had sinned to cause the blindness – the man or his parents – are themselves blind to the reality of innocent suffering, suffering without a moral cause. Surely as they had traveled with Jesus and been present when he fed the hungry, healed the sick and cast out demons, they'd had enough experience of human life to know that many people suffer from afflictions of all kinds without anyone's sin being the cause. And they'd had enough experience to know that Jesus' reaction to a person's affliction was not to ask whose sin had caused it, but rather was compassion and healing, in the words of the gospel, "that God's works might be revealed in [them]" (John 9:3).

The neighbors of the man born blind and those who had seen him beg are almost comical in their confusion and inability to see what was right in front of their eyes – the man who once was blind could now see. Even when "he kept saying, 'I am the man'" (John 9:10), they couldn't stick with the reality in front of them. They wanted to know how the man had been healed and they wanted to know where the healer was. Like the disciples, they wanted an explanation of what they saw, and that desire clouded their vision of the truth.

Finally, the Pharisees – or at least some of them – are spiritually blind. To cure the blind man Jesus made mud on the Sabbath. That was a violation of the Jewish law prohibiting work on the Sabbath. Jesus had broken a religious law, so some of the Pharisees concluded "this man is not from God." With their focus on the observance of laws which were made to help people glorify God by honoring the Sabbath, they were blind to the glorious work of God done by Jesus on the Sabbath – the healing of a man whose entire life had been constrained and limited by a congenital affliction.

When the healed man challenges the Pharisees by saying, "If this man were not from God, he could do nothing," they reply, "You are born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" (John 9:33-34). The Pharisees could not admit that they were wrong about God and that this formerly blind beggar was right. To maintain their self-respect – and self-righteousness – they show scorn for the man favored by God and drive him out of the house of God. Jesus lets them know that their refusal to admit their spiritual blindness demonstrates their sin.

Many of us share the weaknesses of the characters in this drama. Like the disciples, we may get so caught up in trying to understand the world we live in that we don't see the opportunities right in front of us to do something to make the world a better

place for others. Like the neighbors of the blind man, we fail to really see and appreciate the glorious work of God staring us in the face because we don't understand how God works or where God is, exactly. Like the Pharisees, we sometimes get so focused on what is small and relatively unimportant that we miss the bigger picture. Sometimes we may be so blind to our own faults or so unwilling to admit them that we criticize others and drive them away with scorn. This happens in the church today just as it did in the synagogue two thousand years ago.

Last week our gospel lesson was the account of Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well. You will remember that the woman's recognition of Jesus as the Messiah was gradual rather than immediate. The same is true for the man born blind. He had no doubt about his healing, and when he was questioned, he declared that Jesus was "a prophet." But he did not fully believe in Jesus as the Messiah until he had another conversation with Jesus, who clearly told him his identity. Then the man believed and worshiped Jesus.

Again, I think we are like the Samaritan woman and the man born blind. It takes us time to recognize Jesus and the work of God in our lives. The process is gradual, with moments of clarity separated by periods of relatively less light. It is good to ask ourselves often – how has God acted in my life? How is God acting now, in my life and in the lives of others? Where is God at work, and how can I join in God's work?

Jesus' exchange with the Pharisees warns us of a deadly pitfall. If we think that we have all the answers about how and where God is at work, we are being willfully blind and will be held accountable for this sin. God is greater than our comprehension. God is greater than our religious traditions. God is mysterious and surprising. Look for God in works of light, justice, compassion, and love – anywhere and everywhere.

In Lent it is important to look at the relationship between sin and affliction. We see clearly that Jesus was afflicted, not for his sin, but because of the sin of others. Jesus was the innocent victim of sin, who died on the cross "that God's works might be revealed in him" (John 9:3). God's works revealed in Jesus include both his self-giving love and his Resurrection. Christ, the light of the world, calls us to look at the world and at ourselves in his light. And Christ calls us to glorify God by doing the will of God, as he has shown us by his example.

On Friday we honored St. Patrick as an apostle to the Irish people. I want to share with you a blessing attributed to St. Patrick. You may wish to use this blessing or certain phrases of it for your own prayer, using either the word "us" or "me."

May the strength of God pilot us,  
May the power of God preserve us,  
May the wisdom of God instruct us,  
May the hand of God protect us,  
May the way of God direct us,  
May the shield of God defend us,  
May the host of God guard us against the snares of evil and the temptations of  
the world.  
Amen.