FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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March 19, 2023

*Changing Light* John 9:1-17, 34-38

There are at least a couple of things we do not think about very often when we read or hear this story proclaimed. The first is: how far did the man born with blindness have to go to get to the pool of Siloam to wash the mud from his eyes?

Another thing we do not think about is that because he was still blind when Jesus sent him off to wash, he does not see Jesus until the end of the story. He hears Jesus, but he does not see him until much later.

In between these two moments in the life of this man born with blindness, so many things happen. A light begins to flicker in this man’s world. First it is in his eyes. Later, the light he sees will be the light that fills his life.

It does not begin with hope. As we heard, this man who was born with blindness first has to endure hearing yet another group of people speculating on the relative sinfulness of his past that caused his blindness—it had to be either he or his parents, someone was to blame. This is what was thought about illness or disability in those days and for a good time afterwards unfortunately. This is also what the disciples were saying when they asked Jesus about him.

It was if they did not care that he could hear them. In effect, *they* were blind to him as a human being. Sadly, it most certainly was not the first time he had heard such things. I can imagine that such talk was inevitable and when he heard it, each time he heard it, his heart and spirit became as dark as his sight.

As for Jesus’ response to the disciples’ question, it is important to note that the translation we use, the New Revised Standard Version, adds in the phrase, “he was born blind…” to Jesus’ words, and this is not strictly correct. In the NRSV translation, it says: “*he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.”* [v.3]

Scholars point out that the more accurate translation would be *“Neither this man nor his parents sinned. But in order that God’s works might be revealed in him it is necessary for us to work the works of the one who sent me…”*

Try to imagine the heart of the man born with blindness when he hears Jesus’ voice saying this. The man still cannot see him, but he can feel his world filling with light as he hears this new voice saying that it was not sin. This new voice says that his blindness was not God’s curse on him or his family. However, says the voice, God’s power to love and make whole can be most readily uncovered and showed to the world through him.

Then, out-of-the-blue, he hears the distinct sound of someone spitting. He knows the sound because there are many who have spat on him—those who did not want to be bothered with his suffering or those who took it for a fraud.

He would have gotten away, but before he could he felt a hand on his shoulder. The next thing he knew, someone was gently smearing something across his eyes.

This was something quite different from anything he had ever experienced, and for some reason, he knew this was the source of light and goodness he had heard. So, he did something very important: he stayed still to find out what would happen next.

Finally, the voice tells him to go and wash.

To be honest, I had never thought about how far the man born with blindness had to go in order to wash his face. It could not be just anywhere, too. It had to be the pool known as Siloam. Jesus very specifically instructed him to wash there.

John tells us that the word, Siloam, means sent. That is quite on point because, as one commentator has figured out, if Jesus was just coming out of the Temple (where he had been teaching, in chapter 8), the pool of Siloam would have been a good 500-yards from where they were standing.

And yet, the man born with blindness believes and does not hesitate. He believes and immediately follows Jesus’ command. He gets up and stumbles through the streets of Jerusalem wearing a ridiculous mask of mud. It is quite a distance for him to cover, groping and blundering along trying to ignore the jostling of the people all around him.

Those bystanders would probably have been fairly eager to make way for the spectacle of a man covered in mud hurriedly groping his way along. They may not have been too kind either, pushing him aside whenever he came too close.

As for the man himself, even if he knew the Jerusalem well, it would have been a trek. Still, every step that brought him closer to the pool also lightened his heart and mind. Inch-by-inch, his world was changing, growing brighter.

Finally, as he washes, things begin to come into focus. First, it was just fuzziness as the water washed away the mud. Then, he was aware that he was seeing his own hands for the first time in his life. Then he saw the water that he had been splashing onto his face. Now, as he looks around, he sees the world.

For the first time in his life, he can physically see. The light of day is streaming down all around him. He can see the way it dances on the surface of the pool. Even more importantly, he can see the faces of the people around him. He may even have looked into the pool to see his own face for the first time in his life.

He sees all of this, but he does not see the face of the man who healed him. He would not know Jesus by sight anyway. However, he knows what he has experienced of Jesus.

First and foremost, he knows that Jesus saw *him*.

His neighbors had been used to seeing him as a blind beggar. Perhaps they gave him a coin ever now and then out of pity, but mostly, they saw what the disciples saw. Without knowing him or his heart and his history, they saw his blindness and they saw weakness, they saw this as suffering, they saw this as sin.

This is not what Jesus saw. He saw a man in need of the power of God’s love. This is what Jesus gave him—it was not only his sight. Jesus acknowledged his dignity as a human being. By giving him his sight, Jesus also gave him what he needed in that time and place to be a fully included and valued member of the community.

However, what Jesus gave him—and the disciples, and everyone else in this story—was a chance to “see” and experience the love of God. In so doing, he gave the healed man a chance to come to belief. Having done this, the healed man could do nothing more or less than worship him.

As for the healed man’s neighbors, the Pharisees—and if you remember what was in the verses that were not read—even his parents are not sure of what is happening. They can see for themselves what has happened, but they are not able to understand it or what to make of it—each for their own reasons.

The neighbors were simply uninformed and confused. They were used to seeing him one way and could not believe their eyes when they saw him, and he was healed. We could say that their ability to “see” was compromised by their preconceptions about who he was and what God was doing in his life—before and after his healing.

The Pharisees’ ability to see what is happening is colored by the affront to their authority they believe Jesus’ actions are causing. Further, it was the Sabbath and unlawful to do any work. So, they assume that Jesus is someone who flaunts the laws, a lawbreaker.

It seems that they all see or do not see according to their ability to understand who God is and how God wants to work in our lives, and in the way God *is* working in our lives.

The man’s neighbors, and even strangers (like the disciples) saw only his blindness. If they did see more, it was only the sin that popular morality attached to him. This allowed them to ignore him or “write him off” as a bad investment of their time and concern. They could not see who he was, nor what God wanted to do in his life and in the life of all people.

As one scholar has written:

*In our daily lives we all make choices (consciously or subconsciously) about what we will see and what we won’t. It’s tempting to choose not to see the suffering and injustice in our world – to switch off the news, and to ignore reports of grief, war and trauma. It’s tempting to avoid seeing certain people and to allow them to just blend in with the landscape, removing their need and struggle from our vision….It’s tempting to avoid seeing the resources, the opportunities and the capacity we have for making a difference, and to rather believe we can do nothing.*

Here’s the thing: if we have really seen Jesus, and if we have truly seen God’s reign proclaimed and manifest in Christ, then we have to confront things how we see things, and allow God’s grace and mercy, God’s truth and justice to change our seeing and shed light on our world, our relationships and even our neighborhoods.

Most of all, our seeing must be informed by God’s different perspective where the greatest are the least, and where everyone—even this unnamed man who had been born with blindness, or a new carpenter-rabbi from the countryside, or even a small church in Honolulu—can make significant differences in the world.

In this story, the disciples noticed a man for all the wrong reasons. Jesus saw an opportunity to shed light on the love of God and what it can do in our lives. He also saw an opportunity to teach the disciples, and the Pharisees, and the man’s neighbor, and us that if we have really seen Jesus, and if we have truly seen God’s reign proclaimed and manifest in Christ, then we have to confront how we see things.

And we have to allow God’s grace and mercy, God’s truth and justice to change our seeing and shed light on our world, our relationships and our neighborhoods because this is our good news: that the light of the world, Jesus Christ, is here in this place, in each one of us who believes in his love and gladly receives his light in our lives.

And so my prayer, and I hope yours too, is that we will continue, as individuals and as a congregation, to be a people who do not hesitate or falter when we, too, see an opportunity to show God’s love, but will even stumble or grope our way into the light.

I pray that Christ will change the light in our eyes so that we may see him clearly and rejoice and worship him. May this be so. Amen.