

March 22, 2020

Sharing the Story

Shepherd's Grace Church -On Line

As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. ²His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' ³Jesus answered, 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. ⁴We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. ⁵As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.' ⁶When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, ⁷saying to him, 'Go, wash in the pool of Siloam' (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. ⁸The 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?' ⁹Some were saying, 'It is he.' Others were saying, 'No, but it is someone like him.' He kept saying, 'I am the man.' ¹⁰But they kept asking him, 'Then how were your eyes opened?' ¹¹He 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.' ¹²They said to him, 'Where is he?' He said, 'I do not know.'

¹³ They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. ¹⁴Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. ¹⁵Then 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.' ¹⁶Some 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. ¹⁷So 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.'

¹⁸ 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 ¹⁹and asked them, 'Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?' ²⁰His parents answered, 'We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; ²¹but 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.' ²²His 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. ²³Therefore his parents said, 'He is of age; ask him.'

²⁴ 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.' ²⁵He

answered, 'I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.' ²⁶They said to him, 'What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?' ²⁷He 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?' ²⁸Then they reviled him, saying, 'You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. ²⁹We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.' ³⁰The man answered, 'Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. ³¹We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. ³²Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. ³³If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.' ³⁴They answered him, 'You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?' And they drove him out.

³⁵Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, 'Do you believe in the Son of Man?' ³⁶He answered, 'And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.' ³⁷Jesus said to him, 'You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.' ³⁸He said, 'Lord, I believe.' And he worshipped him. ³⁹Jesus said, 'I came into this world for judgement so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.' ⁴⁰Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, 'Surely we are not blind, are we?' ⁴¹Jesus said to them, 'If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, "We see", your sin remains. (John 9)

Welcome to Lent! As we talked last week, there have been many distractions this year to our Lenten journey. Those of you who were present in our safe sanctuary in Arkansas City last week might remember that I asked if you had been able to remain faithful to the commitments you made during this season. Have you been able to continue in the sacrifices you entered in to? Have you been able to honor the obligations you made to God, obligations to give more of yourself or to serve in some way?

As I asked the question last week, I could see many heads shaking no or see lips murmuring no. Well...if you were shaking your head last week, I can't imagine how you might be responding this week. Who could have thought at the beginning of this Lenten season that we would have to sacrifice our sanctuary, our place of worship, our church home in order to do the work we committed to?

Who would have thought we would have to isolate ourselves and practice a social behavior that was not even conceived of...a term that we had to invent to even describe what was being asked of us? Who would have thought that social distancing would become our new normal?

Welcome to Lent! Welcome to the unexpected reality of what it means to walk with Jesus! This is our 5th week of travel and we have walked with Peter, James and John to the top of the mountain. There, enveloped in the cloud, we heard the voice of God as He commanded us, "Listen to Him!" Who could have imagined then that God's command would be such an eminent reality! Who might have thought that the command would cause us to remain in that cloud?

Yes, I said "remain in that cloud." From my perspective, our entire journey to this point in our season has been made in that cloud. It has been a journey for the visually impaired, for the blind, for those who have been seeking but have not been able to see.

It has been a journey just like the road we travel this morning. Usually, when we come together, we can see all of each other. Usually, I can watch your faces and can tell when I am connecting with each of you. Usually, I can change my inflection or my position when I am preaching to you...sometimes to catch up with a person just about to nod off to sleep, sometimes to emphasize a point I can see is really reaching someone. This morning, I am preaching blind. I cannot see any of you and it is as if there is something missing.

Usually when we come together, you can see all of me. This morning, I am told you can only see me from about mid chest. I cannot see the camera that is broadcasting our message this morning so I cannot see what you see. I know only what I am told. The good news is that you cannot see everything either. You cannot know that I am preaching with no pants on. You cannot be sure of how I am dressed. You see the suit and the tie, but you do not know what is behind that or even if it is a full suit. In a sense, it is as if we are still in that cloud, that transfiguration cloud where we can only see Jesus and where we can only see him fully.

We cannot be fully seen because we only see in part. (1Cor. 13) We are blinded by our lack of knowledge and that is part of the sacrifice we have been asked to make this Lenten season. Another sacrifice we have been asked to make is to set aside all our sacrifices. We have been asked instead of setting individual goals, to recognize the sacrifice we are all being asked to make together.

We can see that our commitment to give up chocolate or diet coke pales in comparison to our willingness to accept our responsibility to every other person on this planet. We can recognize that we can no longer be blind to the actions we take and the consequences of those actions. Our Lenten journey is

no longer a journey we take alone, and the irony of that is that we have had to isolate ourselves to discover the reality!

Today, our blindness leaves us naked like the preacher with no pants. Today, our blindness leaves us nervous like the preacher who cannot see the congregation. Today, our blindness leaves us realizing just how much we need one another and how that need becomes the path for this Lenten journey.

The need we have for one another and the commitment we make to each other becomes the message of this season. This need invites us to enter the story, to share the story in such a special way that we open ourselves to possibilities that have never been more real.

Today, we walk in that transformation cloud where there is no one there but only Jesus and we have a chance to step out of that cloud today, having seen the authentic Jesus and having a chance to walk with Him as He really is...having a chance to walk with him all the way to Jerusalem. Welcome to Lent where the struggle is real, where the sacrifice goes beyond our own blindness, where the possibilities for redemption are not just possibilities for us but for the whole human family!

Are you ready to enter this story? Are you ready to share this story? Are you ready to share this stage with Jesus?

Given the current environment, there are so many places to enter this story, so many places where you can share the stage with Jesus. You could choose to enter right at the beginning, with Jesus walking down the road. Of course, if you choose that point, you must go back to the previous chapter to verse 16 and remember Jesus statement, "I Am the light of the world." The statement is one of 7 "I Am" claims Jesus makes in John's gospel and it is intended to point to who Jesus really is.

As we come out of the cloud today, we can look to the light, the light that points to Jesus as the Word become flesh, the true Son of God the father filled with grace and truth.(John 1) "I Am" announces the reality of God with us. If we were at Christmas time, we would say Emmanuel. If we were true to our endeavor in the Lenten season we would remember that Christmas is more than a day, it is a way. As we enter the story this morning, perhaps we can enter from the spirit of Emmanuel, God with us...God, the light of the world...God the "I Am" who commissioned Moses and who commissions each one of us to share the good news that God seeks to set His people free! As we enter this morning, even from the beginning of this story, we enter with

Christmas in our hearts. We enter knowing that the day is a date on the calendar, but the way is a way of life.

If you share the story, share the stage from this point of entry, you walk the path with Jesus. You choose to step out of the cloud and into the light of the world. You choose to ask the question, "Who Sinned?" You choose to ask the question, not as judgment, but instead as a point of reference. You ask, remembering the events of chapter 8 where Jesus was confronted with the woman accused of adultery.

All the elders of her community were quick to judge her...to stone her to death until Jesus reminded them of their own shortcomings...of their own sins. Once confronted with the reality that "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God," (Rom. 3) all walked away.

When we ask the question this morning, when we say, "Who Sinned?" we might imagine we are imposing a first century point of view on our 21st century world. We might believe we are no longer so naïve as to believe that someone born with a physical or even a mental challenge is born that way because of a sin they committed before they were born. We might want to believe that we no longer cast that kind of judgment on others.

If we choose to share the story from this point of entry, we must realize that we have not come that far in the past 2000 years. Today, we , acknowledge that a physical or mental challenge is not the result of a sin but we still drag those who are different out in the open and point fingers. We still want to look at the lives of others and say, they are different, they must be wrong.

Perhaps their difference is in their sexual persuasion or their politics. Perhaps their difference is in their attitude about men's or women's rights. Perhaps, their difference is in their accent or their religious conviction. The difference is not what makes the difference. What makes the difference is our eagerness to expose their difference so we can cover our own.

Now, ask the question..."Who sinned?" Jesus quickly answers the question! Not the man nor his parents. As he makes this affirmation, we are reminded of God's admonition in Romans 2. Judge not, lest you also be judged.

Jesus wants his disciples to learn the lesson and to learn it well. The mistakes we make are not the sins. The sins are our unwillingness to recognize that what we have done is not a way to love God or love neighbor. Jesus wants his disciples to embrace the man born blind as a neighbor and recognize this man as someone who has something to offer to the world.

In the first century, it was common to believe that those who appear to us to be unwhole make them entirely unworthy. Jesus wants us to immediately see people for what they do have and not for what they do not.

To illustrate that point, he puts a mask on the man's eyes. He covers them with clay (More on this in just a moment) so the disciples cannot see the man's eyes.

In the statement he makes just before he covers the man's eyes, he tells the disciples that we must all work while there is still light. As he heals the blind man, he wants the disciples to look past the darkness they see in the man's blindness and look to the light. He is the light.

For all of us, this lesson is essential as we think about the situation that brings us to the unusual circumstances of today. Covid 19 takes our focus off the work that is in front of us. It causes us to focus on things that are not of faith but of distraction. We must look to the light, the light of day to see what can be done and how we might be involved in getting things done that will bring light to the world.

Are we to shelter in place? Are we to self-quarantine? Are we to restrict contact even with family? Why must we do all or any of these things? I believe Jesus' answer is simple. We must do these things so others will be able to see through us that we care about one another. During this week, I have heard many people say, "I can survive this virus." Quite simply, your survival, my survival is not the point. Our survival only matters if we help others to survive.

We accomplish this by focusing on the reality that we may inadvertently carry the virus to others because we have unknowingly come in contact with someone who carries the virus themselves! Even if we can survive, someone we come in contact with might come in contact with someone who cannot!

Our responsibility is to see the light, the logic if you will, of making good decisions about limiting contact not so we will contract the virus but so we will not pass on our contact to someone who might not be able to survive.

We might think we are living in the part of the passage where Jesus talks about night where no one will work. **WE ARE NOT!!** Jesus, the light of the world is in the world and we are walking...working in the light, the light of God given so we can see one another and work together to overcome the obstacles that are in front of us...to overcome them together.

Jesus covers the eyes of the man so his disciples (we) will not see the man's shortcomings but begin to focus on what the man has to offer. And what does

the man have to offer? He has the reminder which he now wears of our unique roll in creation. As Jesus covers the man's eyes with clay, he reminds us that we are all made from clay and that what gives us life is not our flesh, but the very breath of God, the ruach, the wind or spirit that fills each of us and invites us to live in the image and likeness of God.

That image, that likeness is quite simply Love. It is the love we have for ourselves as people of great worth, the love we have for one another as people unique in gifts that are all important to the work we are to perform. It is the love we have for God who breathes life into us to begin with, but then sustains us in that life so that we might know that our shortcomings, our sins have been overcome and that we are once again worthy to stand in God's presence.

This image has been clouded by the man's blindness that caused others to overlook his importance to the world as a whole. Once he washes away the blindness in his own eyes, others begin to see him differently. Some wonder if he is the same man at all. All these people have ever seen is his deformity. They have never seen him as whole. When the man insists that he is the one they saw, they wonder how he received his sight.

As the man tells his story, the wonderers are in a cloud, much like the one we have been in. Where is this Jesus who healed you, they ask. Why has he not made himself known to us?

Don't we all ask these questions as we face the realities of our situation now? Where is God? Why is God not moving in this world to put an end to the difficulties of this moment? Why is God late to the party? (Next week, we will discuss God's timing in more detail as we explore where we might enter the journey of Jesus with Lazarus.) In this moment, we can simply say that God's time is not our time.

I often express to people who are in the hospital that there are three different kinds of time. There is the 24 hour day we are used to, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. 24/7/365 There is hospital time which pays no attention to the events of the world but operates precisely and perfectly according to the frustrating and frightening sense of bureaucracy we must all endure there. (Perhaps some of you have had to recognize this reality recently) Finally, there is God's time which is really no time at all. God exists outside of time in an eternity where he can be 4 days late and still be right on time.

Today, in this world we are wondering where God is and we have not figured out that we are asking the wrong question. Instead of where is God, let us ask when is God. Let us anticipate the reality of God's promise. As Forest

Gump said, "then God showed up." When God shows up, there will be a storm of activity and the fulfilment of promise that we cannot begin to imagine.

The people were looking for Jesus for themselves. The might have considered looking for Jesus for all of us...celebrating the wholeness of one who could begin to contribute in ways which we never imagined. If you find yourself entering the story and sharing the stage from the perspective of the townspeople, you are not alone. Many of us want Jesus to show up just for us and right when we want Him. Prayerfully, we can remember that even if He is 4 days late, he is still right on time.

Perhaps you find yourself entering the story from the perspective of the Pharisees; the ones who interpret the law and not from the perspective of all who are sinners, but from a perspective of needing proof. How was your sight restored they wanted to know? What did He do to you?

When the blindman shares his story with people such as these, they are wanting to find fault, not so much with him but with the one who threatens their power. "This man cannot be from God!" they said. He doesn't observe the traditions we have established for those who claim to be from God.

In the world in which we live today, there is so much finger pointing going on from those who are in charge. They have fought long and hard to establish themselves in positions of authority that they cannot imagine another claiming to have authority and establishing that authority, not in traditions, but in relationship.

Jesus teaches that while traditions can be important, they are only important if kept in perspective. When people become so caught up in the way they worship, or live together, or love one another that they forget why they worship, live together or love one another they have forgotten the reason God desires us to be in communion (a word I prefer to community) in the first place.

God desires us to be in communion with one another so we can be one with one another...so we can work and build and bring together the Kingdom God has been working from the beginning to establish. This communion cannot be established singularly. It must be bound together with hearts that will never be broken. It must be bound together by love!

The Pharisees could not comprehend this reality. They could only see the threat to themselves and they were willing to destroy all they had built to preserve their power.

Today, there are those among us who will resist the needs of others for their own power. I do not have to shelter in place. I do not have to self-quarantine. I can do what ever I want.

I am sure you have heard these people. Perhaps you have even joined in to their righteous indignation as they said that no one has the power to tell me what to do or how to do it. I have earned the right to make my own choices and here in the United States, that right is protected.

Of course, these people are right. We do have rights in our country and they are individual rights, but they are superseded by the rights of the common good. In case you missed it, to provide for the common defense comes before the bill or individual rights. Our life together has always been regarded as more important than our lives as individuals and it can only be in our life together that we accomplish the rights we have and want as individuals.

The Pharisees forget that this is not only a right in the United States, but a right of all people everywhere. We are important to one another and our leadership must realize that they are called to lead not from the front but from the rear. "Those who would be great among you must be least and servant to all." (John 13)

If you entered the story with the idea that any one group has the right or responsibility to tell another group or individual that tradition trumps love, do not feel alone. Throughout history, people have been claiming power without realizing that all power ultimately belongs to God. "All of us are sinners and all have fallen short of the glory of God." (Rom. 3)

Perhaps you entered from this point in the story assuming that it was our responsibility to Judge so we could point others in the "right" direction. The formerly blind man invites you to join him as he learns the lessons of discipleship.

There is a heavy price to pay for standing up and speaking truth to power. When the one who knew nothing learns everything from Jesus, he has a difficult time understanding why others would not want to receive what he has to share. You have heard it said, "there is no zealot like a convert." In this case, the man offers advice and pays the price.

He is driven out because power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. He is driven out because those in power are not yet ready to receive what he has to share.

Many have heard me tell the story of the new seminary student who witnesses to an inmate in prison. The student wins over the inmate in the early hours of

the morning and goes out singing and dancing and giving glory to God. The next day, the student comes back to speak with the new convert and the convert tells him he is number 24. By that, the convert means there were 23 others who had shared the story before he came to share that night. The message from the convert is that we never know where we are in the story. Some of us might be the first witness to God's power, some might be fortunate to be number 24. Our message is not to convert but to share and as John Wesley said, "if necessary to use words."

It is for this reason that Jesus said to the disciples when they asked who sinned, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned but the man is blind so God's glory can be revealed." Without using words, Jesus demonstrates to the disciples that in all things, the Glory of God will shine through as the light to the world if we let it.

The man born blind started as an example of this. Surely no one could doubt the miracle and yet, so few were willing to give praise to God for that which had happened...not the townspeople, not the Pharisees and in the beginning, not even the disciples themselves. The man, however learned through the process about the mighty acts of God, the willingness of God to get involved even in his condition, and the man also learned the ability to appreciate all God had done for him and bear witness to that Glory.

In these days where so much of our routine is disrupted, where so much of what was predictable in our lives is now unpredictable we can learn from the blind man and from Jesus. This circumstance of quarantine and shelter in place is not resolved, but when it is resolved we will look back and find God's hand in the solutions and in the future that will be ours.

In this moment, what might happen if we give God the Glory now, and anticipate the ways God might like that glory to be revealed. It could be in the act of kindness we show a neighbor our even our children or spouse. It could be in the way we communicate with a co-worker as we work remotely instead of face to face. It could be in the smile we share with someone who is out for a walk at the same time we are during the day...the encouraging, knowing smile that says we are in this together.

All these things can happen not because of sin or virus or something else in the world, but so that God's Glory can be revealed here and now! Amen

