

In the name of the most high Trinity and holy Unity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

This Lent, we have had and will have several wonderful, yet long readings from the Gospel of John. Two weeks ago, we heard the conversation between two rabbis, Nicodemus and Jesus, about being born again. Last week, we heard about Jesus talking with a Samaritan woman offering her living water. And this outcast woman tells her town that she thinks Jesus is the promised messiah. Next week we will hear about the raising of Lazarus from the dead against the backdrop of increased hostility from the Jewish leaders.

But, today we heard about the healing of the man born blind. This story is a wonderful example of the Gospel of John's literary ability. John tells us a fairly straightforward story like the healing of the blind. But, John isn't satisfied with just the story of the healing. He wants us to see the deeper meaning behind it. Matthew, Mark, and Luke would tell the story of the miracle, and then immediately move on to the next miracle or parable. But, John wades and soaks in this story. He tells us what goes on leading up to the miracle, and he follows-up with what happens after. In this narrative, John wants to give us an extensive look to contemplate who Jesus is and what this story means for us as Jesus's followers. But, before we jump into today's story, I think we should back up to what is going on in chapter 8 leading up to the healing of the blind man in chapter 9.

In chapter 8, Jesus is in the temple for the Jewish Festival of Booths or Sukkot.<sup>1</sup> And, Jesus gets into a heated discussion with the Pharisees. I think it would have drawn quite a crowd. Rabbi Showdown: Rumble in the Temple. Rabbi Jesus and the Pharisaical rabbis duking it out. This is a debate about the authority to teach and about sin. Who is following the faith of Abraham better? And, who is really following God and God's Law, the Torah?

Throughout this debate, both Jesus and the other teachers exchange attacks with each other: "Your father is the devil."<sup>2</sup> "Well, you're either a Samaritan or you have a demon."<sup>3</sup> This is a tense and vicious Rabbinical argument.

The end of the debate circles back to Abraham. Jesus says to the Pharisees, "Your ancestor Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day; he saw it and was glad."<sup>4</sup> That statement takes the Pharisees by surprise. Jesus is insinuating he knows Abraham personally. So, they respond incredulously, "You aren't even 50 years old! How can you

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<sup>1</sup> Leviticus 23:42-43

<sup>2</sup> John 8:44

<sup>3</sup> John 8:48

<sup>4</sup> John 8:56

say that you have seen Abraham?”<sup>5</sup> And Jesus gives a bombshell reply, “Before Abraham was, I am.”<sup>6</sup> At the burning bush, when Moses asked God what his name is, God responded: “I am who I am”.<sup>7</sup>

When Jesus tells the Pharisees, “Before Abraham was, I am”, Jesus without a doubt is saying he is God. And the Pharisees take that as blasphemy. So, they try to stone Jesus to death for claiming to be God. But, Jesus escapes, and leaves the temple.

And, that lead-in brings us to today’s reading. After leaving the temple, Jesus sees a man who was born blind. Jesus’s disciples ask him, “Rabbi, who sinned this man or his parents?” A couple of things in this one question. First, the disciples call him Rabbi. The disciples acknowledge that Jesus is still their teacher, their Rabbi, even after the knockdown dragout at the temple. Second, I can just see the disciples going, “Ok, Jesus you just were talking a lot about sin with the Pharisees. So, come on, give us some spiritual gossip. Who was it? Whose sin caused this, the man’s or his parents’?” Jesus tells them that it’s not anybody’s fault. But, God’s power is going to be shown through this healing. And Jesus adds that he and the disciples still have work to do before his looming death just 6 months away.

So, Jesus makes some mud from dirt and saliva, and puts the mud on the blind man’s eyes. Jesus tells the man to go wash the mud from his eyes at a pool named Siloam. The man does as Jesus said and he’s healed. Yay! Jesus healed the man. The man can see for the first time ever. Give glory to God. That’s the end of the story, right? Well, not quite.

This man’s neighbors take him to be interrogated by the religious authorities, the Pharisees. Remember that the Pharisees were just in a heated debate with Jesus a chapter before, and tried to kill him. But, there’s a real question about this healing for the neighbors, and especially for the Pharisees. Was this a miracle from God, or demonic intervention? The main point of contention was whether Jesus was working on the Sabbath when he made mud. Some of the Pharisees think that any supposed disregard for God’s Law, the Torah, must mean Jesus couldn’t have been sent from God. Some Pharisees take the position that obviously such a great miracle can only come from God alone. Is Jesus divine or demonic?

The Pharisees decide to ask the man what he thinks. And the man says, “Obviously, Jesus is a prophet.” Not exactly the answer they were hoping for. So, the man’s parents are brought in and questioned. They’re scared of getting kicked out of the synagogue

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<sup>5</sup> John 8:57 *Common English Bible* translation

<sup>6</sup> John 8:57

<sup>7</sup> Exodus 3:14

themselves. So, all they say is that this is their son, that he was born blind, but that their son can answer anything about Jesus or the miracle for himself.

So, the Pharisees go back and talk to the healed man again. They tell him, "Give glory to God. We know that [Jesus] is a sinner". The man sticks to his guns. He does give glory to God, but not how the Pharisees are intending it. The healed man is completely baffled by the Pharisees. He can see who Jesus is, but the Pharisees don't get it at all. So, he tells them, "Here is an astonishing thing! [...] We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. [...] If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." The Pharisees have had enough. And, they kick the man out of the synagogue and from their religious community.

But, Jesus comes back on the scene. Jesus welcomes the healed man into the community of believers. And the man responds that he puts his faith in Jesus and worships him. Then Jesus explains his mission. He explains his messianic role of flipping the script in the world: "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind."

Then, John tells us that some of the Pharisees are hanging around while Jesus is saying this. Oh yes! This is the sequel we've been getting ready for. Rabbi Showdown 2: The Sinfully Blind. What is Jesus going to say to these Pharisees? Well, the Pharisees go first, "Surely, we're not blind, are we?" Surely, we're not missing the point, right, Jesus?

They just perfectly teed it up for Jesus's response: "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains." Ouch.

Now, I think for us 21st century American church goers, we should be very careful here. It might be tempting to get hyped up and celebrate Jesus taking down the Pharisees a couple levels. Nothing wrong with celebrating Jesus, but we should look again at what he's saying before we just jump in with: "Yay! Go Jesus!"

"If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains."

It's tempting to think about sin as some sort of rule breaking. Mess up and transgress these specific laws, therefore you're sinful. But, the Pharisees aren't in trouble because they disobeyed God's Law, the Torah. The Pharisees were very good about keeping Torah and tradition. But that's not what the New Testament envisions as sin.

The word for sin here in John and elsewhere in the New Testament is ἁμαρτία (*hamartia*). ἁμαρτία means missing the mark. You shoot an arrow and miss the bullseye. You aim and shoot, but the arrow veers off target. Sin in the New Testament, ἁμαρτία, is aiming to do what God wants, and without God's grace we just miss the target.

The bottom line of what Jesus is saying to the Pharisees here is: Y'all are trying to shoot a bow with a blindfold on. Of course, you're going to miss the mark. If you realize that you're blinded, God can give you sight. And if you can truly see, you can shoot that arrow straight. But, if you think you can see already while you're blinded, you are going to keep missing the mark and maybe do some real damage. And, you'll keep missing what God wants from you. You think you see how the God of Israel is working, but you completely missed this miracle. That man's physical blindness was not caused by sin. But, you think you can spiritually see when you really can't, so, you really are blind, and your sin remains.

So, we should ask ourselves:

Are we always attentive and perceptive to how God is acting in the world around us?

Now, God is absolutely present with us here as we worship together. In fact, we keep a candle lit 24/7 by the aumbry. That candle is a reminder that Jesus is always here in this space in the Reserved Sacrament of his Body and Blood. This can be a comforting image: Jesus is always here with us in this community of faith.

But, there can be a danger if we're not careful. Sure, in the 21st Century, we might not be concerned with whether making a little mud on the Sabbath is considered work. But, are we always cognizant of what God is doing?

Are we cognizant of how God might be using those of different political beliefs to minister in the world? Are we always attentive to how God might use those of different denominations or even of different religions to build up his kingdom? God's presence is certainly here with us now in this space, but God is also active in the world even now at this very moment in unexpected ways. Don't miss God working because it might not fit your criteria.

May God give us his grace to take away our blindness so we can see how he is working in the world. And may we truly "Give glory to God."

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.