

4th Sunday of Lent

Sermon 3.26.17

Scripture: John 9:1-41

For this story to make sense, we have to begin in the beginning—in the *beginning*, when there was the Word of God, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. That’s how John’s gospel imagines the beginning, similar to how it’s imagined in Genesis, but different too. In Genesis, there’s the sense that, over the course of those storied six days, God finished the work of creation and therefore, on the seventh day, He rested. But in John, there’s no notion that the work of creating is complete, and there’s no Sabbath rest.

This is a crucial theological notion according to John. For John, it’s *not* that the creation, once complete and perfect, has now fallen into a state of sin or brokenness or imperfection. For John, it’s that the creation simply isn’t complete, that God is yet at work on the creation, working it to completion and perfection and wholeness. “God is working his purpose out,” one hymn even promises, “God is working his purpose out...until the world shall be full of the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea.”

It’s funny to me how universally accepted as the true Christian framework the former is: creation, fall, Christ’s sacrifice, human salvation—salvation as a recovery of what was lost. It’s funny that this formulation is thought to be *the* formulation, the *only* formulation, when there’s also another biblical formulation also to ponder, which also holds true, which I actually think holds truer: that God has begun the work of creating and is yet at work, along with the Word, in creating. God is yet at work with Christ the Word in creating—Christ who was with God in the beginning and who also has commissioned us to join in that work. As it happens, that hymn goes on to ask, “What can we do to work God's work, to prosper and increase the love of God in all mankind, the reign of the Prince of peace?”

Consider: the former—creation, fall, sacrifice, salvation—understands the project of living in accordance to God’s call as a project of going back to when things were good, recovering some long-lost perfection. The latter, by contrast—God’s beginning and now yet continuing in God’s creative work—understands the project of living in accordance to God’s call as a project of going forward, moving toward an aim and end that is completion and wholeness and perfection. In sum, the latter claims that ours is not to go back to what once was but to move forward in the faith the God is with us, working amidst us and among us and

through us and in spite of us, into a future that is bright with God's light, a fulfillment of God's promise.

This, the latter, as I said, seems to me the more life-giving way. So much harm is done, it seems to me, in the urge to go back to when things were good, (if not) perfect. Name your time: the time before 9/11, or before Reaganomics, or before the liberalization of immigration laws, or before Vietnam, or before the dawn of government entitlements, or Antebellum America. Name your time: the time before your divorce, before your parents fell ill, before you hit mid-life, before you lost your job, before went to college, before your *parents'* divorce, before, before: good as it was then, the sad fact is that you're never going back to then, *we're* never going back to then. That's just not how life works. It's not *all* bad, of course. What such an urge *can* do is help us to grieve what we've lost, and help us to recognize what we value and build on those values that endure as true. But it won't ever help us fully recover what once was, be who we once were.

John's gospel is eager to have us look in the other direction, to look forward in hope, and then to work the works of God in the world, or as Jesus put it to the disciples in this story, "the works of him who sent me," and as he put it to the disciples at his last supper, promising that they will "do the works that I do and even greater works than these."

It's with this orientation that we must hear the story of the man born blind if we're to understand it at all. It's with this orientation that the spurring question can be understood as off the mark—the question the disciples asked Jesus of the man born blind, "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" And it's with this orientation that Jesus' answer can be heard not as offensive but as speaking truth: "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind that God's works might be revealed in him."

This should *not* indicate to us that God uses human suffering in order to show off, indeed that humans suffer so God, when relieving that suffering, can seem great. This should indicate to us that the fact of this man born blind, and the fact of others similar to him, is indicative of the also fact that God is still doing the work of creation. God's not finished—not yet. It is not finished, won't be until Jesus utters from the cross, "It is finished," which is to say the perfection of the creation comes in the pouring out of God's being, the kenosis, the self-emptying, of being unto beings.

Meanwhile, as long as there is blindness and illness, as long as there is pain and suffering, as long as there is loneliness and despair and desolation, war and chaos and devastation, as long as there is anything imperfect, partial, incomplete, we will simply know that the work of creating is yet in the doing.

Then, as if to illustrate this theological assurance, Jesus spat on the ground and made mud, the very stuff of which “Adam” in the beginning was made—*adam* (“man”) and *adamah* (“dust of the ground”) sharing the same Hebrew root. And with this Jesus rubbed the man’s unseeing eyes, a gesture by which this incomplete bit of creation was made now complete. Finally, he told the man born blind, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent), and which we should hear as a commissioning. When Christ has touched you and completed you, you’re to go out and make this known to the world—and maybe even be as Christ for someone else or something else, touching it and completing it.

The people that the man born blind would end up sent to, though, appear to be his very own people. After washing in Siloam (which means Sent), he returned, the story notes, to the place where he had begged—but many didn’t recognize him. Others wanted to hear the story as Jesus would tell it, but the man born blind didn’t know where Jesus was and likely wouldn’t recognize if he were to see him. After all, he’d been blind when he was with him last.

As if to settle the matter, the people brought the man born blind to some Pharisees, but that only complicated things further. The Pharisees were upset initially that all this work was happening on the Sabbath—the Sabbath that meant many things to them but meant little to Jesus. But their upset quickly moved past this likely familiar question of interpretation (what is work?) to the deeper question of who this Jesus was. Clearly, he was someone who didn’t quite obey the Law (working on the Sabbath as he did) and yet he seemed to be of God.

Trying to reconcile these two things, these Pharisees decided that the man had not been blind after all, that it was a case of mistaken identity or downright deception.

But then they talked to his parents, whom they called on to ask, “Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?”

The parents spoke honestly: “We know he was born blind, and we don’t know how he now sees.”

Then they did something interesting, actually quite heart-wrenching: they distanced themselves from the incident and their son because, as the story notes, they were afraid of

these authorities — of the power they wielded, of perhaps the punitive way they wielded it. “Why don’t you ask him,” they said to the authorities. “He’s of age.”

This is the first time in this story the man born blind was singled out and cast out.

The second time these Pharisees did it.

When the now seeing man and the Pharisees were going back and forth with the same questions, the same answers, finally the now seeing man seems increasingly emboldened.

“Why do you keep asking about the man who did this? Do you want to become his disciples?”

This can only be heard as razzing them, which is how they seem to have heard it. “*You* are his disciples, but *we* are disciples of Moses. *We* know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we don’t where he comes from.”

But then the now seeing man does something impertinent: he includes himself in that *we*. “Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. *We* know that God doesn’t listen to sinners, but he does listen to those who worship and obey him. So, if this man were not from God, he could do nothing.”

And it’s this, apparently, that these Pharisees won’t stand for. It’s this — the now seeing man drawing himself into the circle of *we*, including himself among these Pharisees — that these Pharisees take so strong an offense to. “*You* were born entirely in sin, and are you trying to teach *us*?” And at this they drove him out.

I feel like I should point out that both the man born blind and these Pharisees assert something about God which I doubt to be true, and which I doubt Jesus would assert as true. God *does* listen to sinners — otherwise why would any of us bother to pray? Otherwise, why would Jesus have taught any of us to pray, and to say when we pray, “Our Father, who art in heaven”? Of course, God doesn’t do our bidding, doesn’t obey us. But God does listen to us — sinners all.

I suppose it shouldn’t surprise me that these Pharisees thought otherwise, but it *does* surprise me that the now seeing man assumed such a thing. He otherwise seems to have had such a strong sense of himself. In spite of an unfortunate lot in life, he seems surprisingly self-assured.

Or perhaps he became so once his eyesight was realized. Yes, I think that’s it.

Now seeing, he had everyone confused, confused as to who he was. “Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?” some asked. “No, but it is someone like him,” others answered.

Meanwhile, he kept saying something that, especially in John's gospel, is significant. "I am the man," he kept saying, or in Greek, "*Ego eimi*."

This is a phrase we hear a lot in John's gospel. But it's only Jesus who otherwise says it—eight times, in fact. "*Ego eimi* the bread of life." "*Ego eimi* the light of the world." "Before Abraham was, *ego eimi*." "I am the door." "I am the good shepherd." "I am the resurrection and the life." "I am the way, the truth, and the life." "I am the true vine." John's gospel is the gospel of the *ego eimi* statements, I Am statements, a phrase that recalls what God named of Godself when Moses asked at the burning bush, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" God's answer was, in Hebrew, YHWH, which the Bible translates as "I Am"—pure being.

It's this being by which Jesus *had* being and poured out being, which this gospel wanted us clearly to understand. It's this being also, apparently, that the now seeing man relied on, saying over and over as he did when people overlooked him or mistook him for someone else, *anyone* else, "I am."

I don't know how the self might have perceived itself in the ancient world—if such a thing would even have been possible. It was such a more communitarian time than we live amidst in. So I *do* know that the sort of individualism by which we moderns live, and which we assume as true, would have been utterly foreign to them. The notion that the self might be autonomous, self-made, essential and self-sustained—this, I imagine, would have been unimaginable. Instead, the self, if it could even be imagined, would have been understood as conferred by family and community, held by family and community, affirmed and sustained by the other people in your life. Then, if not now, a self without community wouldn't be thought to be possible, even to exist. A person without some sort of family or group might as well not be at all.

So, as regards this man born blind—the fact of his neighbors overlooking him (though he'd long been among them and begged of them), the fact of his parents distancing themselves from him (for their fear that an association to him might bring trouble), and the fact of the religious authorities driving him out (for his presuming to be one with them)—he might as well not be at all. And yet, now seeing, he kept saying, "I am he. I am the man. I am. I am."

Either he lived out his unfortunate lot in life with surprising fortitude, or this fortitude was something granted him when Christ saw him and touched him and completed him. I think it's the latter—that not only did an encounter with Christ grant him the eyesight that had long been denied him, it also granted him a self that was ever withheld from him.

There's a common assumption that to be involved in church life is to forfeit your intelligence and individuality, is to become like-minded with a bunch of other people who've forfeited their intelligence and individuality so you're all a bunch of automatons reciting confessional talking points that have been programmed into you by preachers who have ego-problems themselves. It's probably no surprise to you that I think it's otherwise—and not just because in that scenario I have ego problems. That might be the case. Anyone drawn to a pulpit on a weekly basis has to keep an eye on that possibility. But it's my experience that the life of faith modeled after Christ and quickened by the Holy Spirit opens up to a flourishing of humanity—of all the ways of being human, and moreover of being one engaged in the world around us all and within us all.

What's more, I think that's biblical. Not just my experience, I think that flourishing is biblical, is indeed one take-away point from this story. I love this story of the now-seeing man, but I admit don't love preaching on it. It takes so much exegesis that little time is left for bringing it all home. But this is what I hope you will bring home of it—that the church doesn't demand conformity but inspires faith; it shouldn't aim for control but for the freedom to love.

Look around: there are so many ways to realize yourself. Given that, I think the church is a community committed to calling out in each of us what God has created each of us to be and to do in the aim of completing and perfecting the creation. After all, there is something frightening about the wild diversity of ways to be when it's completely disconnected from community and accountability, when it's completely unmoored from relationship and responsibility. So, the church serves by coupling that wild possibility to a consideration of what's good and right—yet not with an aim for control, instead with an aim for the freedom to love and choose the good.

Consider, Jesus, when he heard that this now-seeing man had been driven out, circled back to pick him up. I love that final note. No one wants this guy, this piece of garbage. He's evacuated his proper place in life—blind beggar. He's come to think of himself more highly than he should, and no one will have that. So they cast him, which is to consign him to an

even lower place than he'd long occupied. And when Jesus hears this, he circles back and makes his claim. "What you think of as garbage, I think of as just what I need, just what I want."

That's redemption—a re-deeming, a re-assessing and then a recognizing in what's been thrown away something rather of true value. This thing, this which endures as true and good in each of us—this is the thing whose aim and end is the flourishing of reign of God. You have it. We all need it.

Thank God you're here.

Amen.