

Canterbury United Methodist Church  
New Traditions  
March 25, 2017 (Lent 4)

Text: John 15: 9-17, Ephesians 5:8-14

Focus: The gospel lection is the story of Jesus and the blind man at the Pool of Siloam. Though this passage is clearly about a miracle of Jesus, the length of the passage deals with the human reaction to the miracle...both from bystanders but also from the Pharisees. The story is about the relationship between blindness and seeing...and how the blind man and the Pharisees changes places in that relationship through Jesus' action of love.

Function: Inherent in this story, is the nature of how we perceive God's fundamental relationship with us his created children. We think that if we follow religious rules, that God will love us and reward us according...and that if we do not follow the rules, God will not love us and will punish us eternally. In so doing, we assign to God characteristics that do not match the nature of Jesus and his teaching, thus calling into question the validity of the Incarnation. Rohr's writing reconciles this: "God does not love us because we are good; God loves us because God is good."

Prayer: Great and Gracious God, we come before you this morning confessing that we are having a great deal of difficulty loving each other right now. In our desire to be right, we are willing to tear down others who may think differently than we do, worship differently than we do, look differently than we do. We are having trouble loving the other in our world right now, and our fear is blinding us. Help us Lord to see that in your perfect love, all those fears will dissolve...with the certainty of your unconditional love and grace toward all your children. Lord, teach us to love others as you have loved us. In your name we pray....amen.

## On Blindness and Seeing God

### 1) **Before I start today....**

- a) ...let me say something to you about this past week. Valerie and I got to keep our one-year old grandson, Luke, all week while his mom and dad and older sister, Ann Harper were off skiing in Utah.
- b) All of the things that you are thinking about sixty years olds trying to take care of one year olds in your head are true, and they all played out at some point during this past week.
- c) On one level, the work was exhausting...he's got more energy than we do...he likes to throw his food...he's almost ready to walk, so he likes to

walk around with you holding onto your fingertips while you bend over him helping him balance. He's a long way from being potty trained, so there's that whole situation to take care of.

- d) So if we only looked at that whole experience as work that wore us out and made us take Advil every day, we would have been blind to what the week really was: a never-to-be-repeated chance to share time with Luke, to crack up with him when you blow on his stomach...to see his look of joy and self-satisfaction when he pushes his walker around the house with the precision of cutting grass in the front yard. I would have missed the opportunity to see him fall asleep on my chest, and all of the youthful energy and strength drain out of his body as he becomes still and descends into rest.
- e) Only by becoming blind to all of the care and work (that we had forgotten from our time as parents), were we able to see what a blessing the time we got spend with him really was.
- f) So that's what last week was: an exercise in blindness and in seeing. But if in bending over to serve you communion in just a few minutes, you see me unable to straighten back up...you'll know why!

## 2) About today's scripture....

- a) Today's gospel lection is the whole 9<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel according to St. John.
- b) It takes place, on a Sabbath, after Jesus has just left a long session of teaching at the Temple.
- c) Jesus is trying to explain to his Jewish listeners who he is. It is in this teaching session that Jesus says the following:
  - i) "I am the light of the world. If you follow me, you won't be stumbling through darkness, because you will have the light that leads to life."
  - ii) And when asked where his Father was, he said, "Since you don't know who I am, you don't know who my Father is. If you knew me, then you would know my Father, too."
  - iii) And when Jesus talked about Abraham's reaction to his own coming, the crowd jeered him and said, "You aren't even fifty years old. How

can you say you have seen Abraham?” Jesus said, “The truth is, I existed before Abraham was even born.”

- d) And so it was at this point, that the crowd became furious with Jesus and wanted to stone him. But like the crowd in Nazareth early in his ministry, Jesus slipped away from harm and left the temple.

### **3) The story of the Blind Man and the Pool of Siloam...**

- a) The story that John tells today is a familiar one...Jesus restoring the sight of a blind man.
- b) It takes place on the hillside below what today we would call the Temple Mount, in the older part of Jerusalem called the City of David.
- c) And as Jesus often did, he saw a man that needed help and he helped him. He spit in the dirt and made mud, he smeared that divine mud on the blind man's eyes, and told him to go and wash it off in the Pool of Siloam.
- d) The Pool of Siloam, which has only been excavated fairly recently, was a large collecting basin for the water that flowed from the Gihon Springs deep under the Temple Mount, down through Hezekiah's Tunnel, and wound up in a large public area at the Pool of Siloam.
- e) It would have been there that lots of people would have seen him as he washed the mud from his eyes. And it would have been easy to see his reaction as he realizes that he could see for the first time.
- f) This story is about the public reaction to the miracle that they saw play out right in front of their eyes and when they consulted the Pharisees, the questions that they had about it:
  - i) Did Jesus sin by healing this man on the Sabbath in violation of long-established religious laws?
  - ii) What had this man done to deserve to be blind in the first place?
  - iii) How is it possible that God could act through a man (Jesus) who was obviously a sinner for flouting Sabbath laws?

- iv) And how could it be that God could possibly listen to a sinner (the blind man) who was obviously being punished for either something he had done, or something wrong his parents had done?
- g) At the end of the story, Jesus tells the blind man, “I have come to judge the world, I have come to give sign to the blind and to show those who think they see that they are blind.”
- h) And to the Pharisees who heard him say that, and indignantly ask Jesus, “Are you saying we are blind?” Jesus, replies, “If you were blind, you wouldn’t be guilty, but you remain guilty because you claim you can see.”

**4) So on one level, this is a story about seeing and not seeing....**

- a) How the blind man, who physically could not see, through Jesus’ care for him miraculously had his sight given to him for the first time...
- b) And how the Pharisees, who through their religious authority and perceived learning, were blind to what had happened right in front of them, and to who is was that was standing in their midst...because they thought that they were right, and that there was no way that they could be wrong...they brought blindness upon themselves.
- c) That story alone is enough to give us lots of questions to think about:
  - i) At this point in our lives, are we really seeing reality?
  - ii) Does our own self-confidence and learning make us blind to the reality of God’s creative work around us?
  - iii) What are we blind to that we should be seeing?
- d) Those questions by themselves would be enough to make a very nice sermon for this morning.

**5) But I want to point to something else...**

- a) I think it is also a deeper story about God’s connection toward us.
- b) At the beginning of the passage, Jesus’ disciples ask him, “Teacher, why was this man born blind? Was it a result of his own sins or those of his parents?”

- c) This question from the disciples sits on top of all kinds of assumptions that were relevant at that time. Before we had understanding through science of the physical sources of disease and bodily dysfunction, the common assumption was that physical illnesses had a spiritual origin.
- d) And that if something was wrong with you physically, God was punishing you for what you did, or according to Old Testament teaching, that the sins of the father would be visited on future generations.
- e) This kind of thinking was common at that time. But I want to suggest that we still think that way...even after all these years. We see our relationship with God as one that requires good behavior on our part in order for God to love us.
- f) Or said another way, that we control the nature of God's love toward us by our own behavior. Behave well...great--your reward is God's favor and you get your go to heaven free card.
- g) Behave poorly...the news is not so good. God's displeasure with you has eternal consequences, according to this way of thinking.

**6) On this fourth Sunday of Lent...**

- a) I want to suggest that this way of thinking is too much about us and not enough about God.
- b) That the rule-keeping and punishment-oriented nature of God is nowhere present in this story about Jesus and the blind man.
- c) That if we regard the upcoming nature of the crucifixion of Jesus as a required action to pay for our own sins, we may be missing the bigger part of the story...
- d) And that if we see God's part in the crucifixion story as an angry God who is interested in judgment against those who don't measure up...that somehow gives us permission to be angry and judgmental toward those who don't measure up in our eyes.
- e) And nowhere in that, is the kind of love that Jesus shows us in this story...that this man was born blind so that the power of God could be seen in him...

- f) That God's nature is restorative...God's nature is healing...God's nature is toward unconditional love...regardless of the day of the week or the rules of whatever church you might be in.

7) **God loves us because God is good...**

- a) Richard Rohr writes this: "Jesus did not come to change the mind of God about humanity (it did not need changing!). Jesus came to change the mind of humanity about God."
- b) I think this is so important as we continue our journey through Lent: that our relationship with God is not defined by our own sinfulness...although there is plenty of that to go around...both in Jesus' time and today.
- c) Our relationship with God is defined by the nature of God's love for us. And that is what is shown in this story and Jesus and the blind man...and that is what is shown by the story we will tell in a few weeks time about Jesus's death by crucifixion, and God's miracle of resurrection.
- d) One final word from Richard: "We all need to know that God does not love us because we are good; God loves us because God is good. Nothing humans can do will ever decrease or increase God's eternal eagerness to love."

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