

*Fourth Sunday in Lent*

March 26, 2017

Sermon by Pastor Cindy Bullock

The Holy Gospel according to Saint John. (John 9: 1-41)

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

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

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 and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" His parents answered, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but we do not know how it is that he now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself." His 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. Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him."

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

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

The Gospel of our Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Holy Spirit is moving among us. Okay, the Holy Spirit is always moving among us. But sometimes, sometimes there are bursts of wind and fire, and things really get shaken up. And we wonder, "What is going on around here?"

This summer the pastor, me, will be taking a three-month sabbatical, and I won't be around. We were getting ready for that when we found out that our longest tenured staff member, Deb Ahlquist, has been offered an amazing job elsewhere, and will be leaving us after seventeen years. On top of that, this place has had a beautiful influx of new faces – so many people trying to decide if this is a place where they can be welcomed and nurtured and challenged. On top of that, there has been a whirlwind of babies. A whirlwind of new brothers and sisters in Christ to be baptized in the next few weeks: Luke and Eldri, Sienna, Hugh, Henry, and Signe. The Spirit is stirring things up around here!

And not just around here. Look around in our world. Old covers are being lifted and imbedded notions of race or class are being revealed, and we see them for the first time. There are winds and storms and droughts from a changing climate. Changing economic systems, changing modes of communication and transportation. It's enough to make you want to hold on, or hide, or just hope it will all stop.

Because when things get stirred up, we get anxious. Who is responsible for these things? What are we going to do about it? Why does it have to get messy and confusing? Why can't it be like it used to be? How are we going to fix this?

Two weeks ago, when Deb Ahlquist told me she would be leaving the staff, I spent about two days being completely manic. "Okay. We're going to have to cover this, and this, and this. And we need to find people to take care of that, and that. And, and we've got a job description to put together. And we have to post the job there, and there. And we need a team to interview people." And it was like I couldn't even breathe for the anxiety.

You smiled, but I know you do it, too. In the midst of the Spirit's stirring, or in the midst of the wildness and uncertainty of life, we want to fix it, and contain it, and control it, whatever that takes. We make the plans. We make the lists. We try to figure it out.

But life, at its core, is wild and uncertain. Some things just happen. And then the Holy Spirit comes into it all – the Spirit, who is free and uncontainable – and the Spirit stirs us up. We can't always keep things safe, and steady, and controlled, and the way they've always been.

In today's Gospel, Jesus is walking down the road. He's just walking down the road. No one is expecting the world to change. No one is expecting reality to shift. But Jesus is not safe and predictable. Jesus stirs things up. So, when he sees a blind man begging by the side of the road, Jesus does three things:

First, he says, "*I am the light of the world.*" I am the way to see this world. I am the way to understand reality.

Then, two: Jesus spits in the dirt and makes mud, which is messy and confusing, and slightly disgusting.

And then, three: Jesus wipes the mud on the man's eyes, which is slightly more disgusting, and he tells him to go wash it off. The man washes, and he can see.

Jesus appears, things get messy, and God does something amazing. Sounds like real life – where nothing is clean and clear, and God makes amazing things happen when you least expect it.

Then, when this amazing thing happens, Jesus is nowhere to be found. Jesus is gone, disappears for the next twenty-seven verses. And the community is unsure what to do with this man who can see. This doesn't fit what they know. It doesn't fit in what they can prove or explain. It's not neat and predictable. So, of course, they argue about what just happened. They debate, and try to explain it, and contain it, and make it small.

First, there is suspicion. The neighbors think it's a trick. "It's someone who looks like that guy who used to be blind." "It's a fake miracle." Or, "He was never blind in the first place." Suspicion.

Next, there are those who don't want to get involved, the parents. They keep their head down. They don't want to know. They don't want to deal with it. They've got their own problems.

And, finally, there are the Pharisees, who discredit the healing by discrediting the healer. "He is a sinner" – as we might call someone un-American, or un-Christian, unwelcomed, outsider. "Not like us." "Don't pay attention to him. He doesn't fit in here. It's a trick. It's none of my business. He's not one of us." All the reasons to not see a miracle. All the reasons to keep life small and safe and controllable.

And, okay, I get it. Most of us want life that is predictable and safe and under control. We do try to mitigate risk and bolster security. We plan and research and cover the bases. We depend on our intellect, and our bank account, and our healthy lifestyle, and our medical insurance policies, to make life controllable.

But we find they are not enough. Life itself is wild and uncertain. Things happen that are beyond our ability to explain and control.

And there, in the middle of all the arguments and explanations, is the now-seeing man. With theories swirling all around him, he says, "But, but I can see. I couldn't see before, but now I can see. I don't know who is to blame. I don't know if it's a trick. I don't know if he is a sinner. I don't know if this is a world-ending paradox. All I know is I can see." While everybody else is completely missing the miracle, the man says simply, "But I can see."

We live with miracles all around us. We are surrounded by them. We cannot move in this world without touching a miracle. But when we keep our heads down, when we want to manage everything, when we want life safe and controlled and explainable, we miss what's right in front of us.

Now, be clear, to see God's work in this world, to see God involved in every moment, is not to deny reality. It's not that we don't see the world, with all its beauty and terrors and physical laws and natural accidents. We see the world, but we see it differently. Instead of a closed, safe, controllable world, we see a world infused with new possibility, a world where the life-giving power of God swirls and moves and stirs things up. We see our lives in the hands of a loving God, who is leading us somewhere. Leading us to be people we were created to be. Leading us towards justice and loving kindness, toward gentleness and trust.

We can choose to focus on blame, and suspicion, and my own problems and my own pride. We can choose to look away and not see at all.

Or we can open ourselves to the Spirit's wild and uncontainable work among us. We can be open to new paths in life that we weren't expecting. We can watch for miracles to crop up around us, trusting in God's abundance.

We can see the Spirit is stirring things up around here. And we can step up and be a part of it.

Amen.