

**Sunday, March 19, 2023**  
**Fourth Sunday in Lent (Year A)**

John 9.1-41

*The Rev. Michael K. Fincher*

*Service Live Streamed at:*

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/1392693628214788>

*(Sermon begins at about 22:00)*

**“So That God’s Work Might Be Revealed”**

As we begin the fourth (full) week of our Lenten journey, we have yet another unlikely guide. This one being a blind man. Or rather, a man born blind who, as we see in the story, gains his sight thanks to Jesus. Of course, as with our other guides over the last few weeks, and as is always the case in Jesus’ actions, there is in this encounter, shall we say, more than meets the eye. With the emphasis on sight and blindness, and given Jesus’ approach and the development of the character of the man born blind, it quickly becomes apparent that the central theme of this story is perspective—how we see things. Specifically, that this is about the perceptions and opinions that the various characters hold. Not only hold, but the perceptions and opinions that, in many cases, are the defining characteristic of their lives. And that the central lesson to be had is about the perceptions and opinions that we have and how these can become defining characteristics in our lives if we are not careful.

We are confronted with some of these perceptions right off the bat. Upon seeing the blind man, Jesus’ disciples ask “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Perhaps a strange perception from our perspective, but certainly a valid one for the ancients. At that time, and even on through much of our history—and even still in some cultures—it was a common perception that illness, infirmity, disability, or any misfortune must be punishment for some sinful act or moral infraction. If not on the part of the individual so afflicted, then it certainly must be because of some sin somewhere in the family tree. This was certainly true in the Jewish tradition. In Exodus chapter 34, God clearly says, “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty,” and then the zinger, “but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation” (Ex 34.6-7). Although this does become a little murky as time goes by. By the time of the Exile, we have Ezekiel conveying God’s position that “A child shall not suffer for the iniquity of a parent, nor a parent suffer for the iniquity of a child; the righteousness of the righteous shall be his own, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be his own” (Ez 18.20). So, given the contradictory positions contained in scripture, the disciples could be forgiven for their own confusion.

As we see, Jesus promptly rejects the connection between sinful actions and illness. Although unspoken, he also rejects the opposite presumption: that those who are healthy—and you could also add wealthy, powerful, etc.—are righteous. In refuting the disciples’ perspective, Jesus says, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s work might be revealed in him.” It is this latter point—that “he was born blind so that God’s work

might be revealed in him”—that underscores the significance of what is to come. First that Jesus gives the man his sight, and then the man’s response to interactions with the Pharisees.

The healing—the bestowal of the gift of sight—is interesting in and of itself. There is more going on here than just a physical healing. Not because Jesus does so by spitting on the dirt, making mud, and smearing it all over the man’s eyes. Although, I find it a very homey and, shall we say, down to earth approach. Rather, it’s interesting because of what happens next. Jesus tells the man, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam.” There is then the parenthetical note that Siloam means “Sent.” This is significant. The man washes off the mud in a pool that had the name “Sent.” In healing him, Jesus is effectively commissioning and sending the man out to be a disciple. Which is precisely how the man takes it. He recognizes who Jesus is and wants to do his part in spreading the word. In his first interaction with the Pharisees, when they ask him what he has to say about Jesus, he says, “He is a prophet,” recognizing God’s working through Jesus. Of course, not yet realizing that Jesus is far more than a prophet. Nonetheless, a bold statement to be making to the religious authorities. And later in his second interaction with the Pharisees, he specifically responds to their line of questioning by saying, “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?” “Do you ALSO want to become his disciples?” Just as he considers himself to be.

So it is clear the man is transformed in the gaining of his sight. That the physical healing brings spiritual and theological insight. This is most apparent in the second interaction with the Pharisees. Here, the Pharisees enter into their questioning of him with preconceived ideas and opinions about who Jesus is: “Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner.” The man recognizes this limiting perspective, seeing right through their close-mindedness: “I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.” After some defensive posturing on the part of the Pharisees, spouting their credentials, the man puts them in their place when he boldly declares: “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.” Daring to school the religious authorities in their own history, in their own theology. To which the Pharisees have no reasonable response. Instead, they resort to childish name-calling: “You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?” Then they kick him out. They do not want to hear the truth. They are happy to live within the safety of their limited theological and spiritual bubble where they are right and everyone else is wrong. Or rather, where they are righteous and everyone else—at least those who do not agree with them—are sinners.

The man is no longer fearful of the Pharisees. He is emboldened by what Jesus has done in his life and actively confronts them on their false perceptions. In their defensiveness, the Pharisees demonstrate their own blindness to the truth of who Jesus really is. In calling them out, the man shows greater understanding, greater insight and wisdom than the so-called religious authorities. The one who was blind, now sees clearly, while the ones who supposedly can see, are shown to be blind to the truth.

At the beginning of the story, when Jesus and his disciples first see the blind man, the disciples presume that he was blind because of some past sin. The Pharisees then presume that Jesus is a sinner because he heals the man on the Sabbath; and that the man is a sinner because he does not believe the same way they do, because he views Jesus as a prophet and himself as one of Jesus' disciples. The Pharisees miss out on the broader truth of who Jesus is and what is going on in the life of the man born blind because they are distracted by questions of what constitutes sin. They are insistent on holding on to their own preconceived ideas and opinions. As a result, they miss out on the opportunity to participate in the wonders that are unfolding before their eyes. Ironically, they are blind to the broader truth of what is happening as the man born blind is healed and gains his sight. And in so doing, he not only gains physical sight, but also spiritual and theological insight. Insight that surpasses their own.

In our own Lenten journeys, and indeed, throughout our lives, we would do well to have the man born blind as our guide. Because, as I'm sure we are all well aware, becoming entrenched in our own perspectives and opinions is not something that just happened in the past. It is something we continue to deal with in our own time. It is something that we certainly see in so much of the secular and political discourse of our day. And sadly, we even see it in some places in the Church. People holding so tightly to their perceptions and opinions, to the point of viewing and treating those who hold differing perceptions and opinions as "other." Those to be criticized and condemned, for sure. And in more extreme cases, viewed and treated as "the enemy," to be shunned or even vilified. Just as the Pharisees did.

That is not the way of Jesus. Jesus' newest disciple, the man born blind but now given the gift of sight—physical, as well as spiritual and theological—is able to see the truth of who Jesus is and what Jesus is about. To see the truth of what God is about. This is what he is attempting to point out in his pushing back against the entrenched and even vitriolic position of those who were supposedly the authorities, the enlightened ones, the elite, of their day. Such entrenchment and vitriol only serve to alienate and exclude. Whereas Jesus was all about finding ways to embrace and include. To keep everyone at the table, engaged in dialogue, seeking genuine understanding, seeking to find common ground, seeking a basis for continued relationship. One of the most significant symbols of that in the Church is the altar. A representation of the heavenly table where all are welcomed at the banquet. Where ALL are welcomed.

As Jesus said of the man upon first encountering him, "he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him." Through his physical healing and the resulting spiritual and theological insights, he was able to further demonstrate for his fellow disciples who Jesus is. He was able to model some of the deeper truths of Jesus' teachings and of the Kingdom of God. Perhaps he was able to plant the seeds in the minds of a few of the Pharisees that maybe, just maybe, their perspectives were not necessarily accurate or even helpful. And perhaps, he is able to serve as a guide for us in our Lenten journeys and beyond, leading us to deeper insight into how we too might see the world anew. And in turn, be emboldened to seek new opportunities in which God's work might be revealed in us.