

Weekend of Sunday, March 22, 2020
4th Sunday in Lent/Lectionary X/Proper X/Year A

First Reading: 1 Samuel 16:1-13

Second Reading: Ephesians 5:8-14

Gospel Reading: John 9:1-41

Sermon Title: “What We Think We Know and What We Want to Know”

Theme

Jesus heals a man born blind, provoking a hostile reaction that he regards as spiritual blindness to the things of God.

Text

¹As [Jesus] walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. ²His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” ³Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. ⁴We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. ⁵As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” ⁶When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes, ⁷saying to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. ⁸The 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?” ⁹Some were saying, “It is he.” Others were saying, “No, but it is someone like him.” He kept saying, “I am the man.” ¹⁰But they kept asking him, “Then how were your eyes opened?” ¹¹He 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.” ¹²They said to him, “Where is he?” He said, “I do not know.”

¹³They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. ¹⁴Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. ¹⁵Then 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.” ¹⁶Some 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. ¹⁷So 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.”

¹⁸The 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 ¹⁹and asked them, “Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?” ²⁰His parents answered, “We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; ²¹but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.” ²²His 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. ²³Therefore his parents said, “He is of age; ask him.”

²⁴So 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.” ²⁵He answered, “I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.” ²⁶They said to him, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?” ²⁷He 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?” ²⁸Then they reviled him, saying, “You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. ²⁹We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.” ³⁰The man answered, “Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. ³¹We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. ³²Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. ³³If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.” ³⁴They answered him, “You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?” And they drove him out.

³⁵Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” ³⁶He answered, “And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.” ³⁷Jesus said to him, “You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.” ³⁸He said, “Lord, I believe.” And he worshiped him. ³⁹Jesus 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.” ⁴⁰Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, “Surely we are not blind, are we?” ⁴¹Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.”

Sermon

Welcome to the sermon time for the weekends of Lent.

This Lent I am preaching and teaching on the theme of "Journey with Jesus through John" and throughout this series I will be unpacking a couple of themes. One of those themes is *knowing*, or *knowledge* and some questions you can expect us to explore are:

- What do we, or can we know for sure?
- Does God revealed in Jesus Christ want to be known?
- How is it that God revealed in Jesus Christ seems to know us so well?

And then as I have mentioned throughout this sermon series, it is my opinion that Lent is supposed to be a season of *observation*. You see, it appears to me that the Gospel Readings this Lent are stories of Jesus doing something and all we can do is observe him. He does not teach a particular lesson and then ask us to "go and do likewise." It would appear that what we are to do during Lent is simply observe him, although there are certainly lessons we can learn and actions we can take which I will bring out at the conclusion.

So then, let's get started with the Gospel Reading and the sermon for today entitled, "*What We Think We Know and What We Want to Know.*" I think this is a particularly appropriate story for this weekend because the news seems to change by the hour. Just when we think we know something for sure, the president or the governor holds a press conference and we have to re-think what we thought we knew. And there are things we want to know, especially about coronavirus, but it is new and not a lot can be known yet. It is frustrating and aggravating and there is little we can do, apart from what we already know about handwashing, social distancing, staying inside and away from others.

And there is one other thing we know, at least that I am now acutely aware of, and that is that the elderly are "60 and over." Is it just me or are they just now emphasizing that the elderly are "60 and over?" My grandparents were elderly! Those 60 are elderly? Really? But I digress.

You heard the Gospel read a few moments ago. Did you notice how many times the word “know” was used in 41 verses? Go ahead, count them up, I’ll wait. Just kidding! 13 times! In just 41 verses, John used the word “know” 13 times! The whole dialogue between the formerly blind man, his friends, his parents, the Jews who may also be the same group of people known as the Pharisees, and with Jesus Christ reminds me of the infamous press conference held by Donald Rumsfeld. Do you remember this?

Play the Rumsfeld Unknown Unknown video

So what do we know? We know that according to John, Jesus was walking along and noticed a man blind from birth and his disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” You see, it was conventional wisdom in those days that God gave people what they deserved. In other words, if I was a godly person, nothing bad would ever happen to me.

I both like and dislike this philosophy. I like it because it makes sense to me that if I could just live a godly life, all things, *all things* will go well for me. I also like it because it makes sense to me that the opposite should also be true – for other people. If he or she is ungodly, a liar, a bad person, then all things will go badly for he or she.

So while it would be nice if things were that clear cut, we know from our own human experience of life that that is not the way God works. Scripture says that our Father in Heaven loves all his creation so much that he “makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.” (Matthew 5:45)

And it’s a good thing that we don’t get what we ask for “since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23) and “he does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.” (Psalm 103:10).

Back to the story, the disciples, operating with conventional wisdom think they know the truth about this blind man’s situation, and Jesus just blew away what they thought they knew.

This same kind of knowing and not knowing went back in forth in the story between not just Jesus and his disciples, but also:

- Between the neighbors and friends of the formerly blind man
- Between the Pharisees and the formerly blind man
- Between the Jews (who may be the same people as the Pharisees) and the formerly blind man.
- Between the Jews and the formerly blind man's parents
- And again between the Jews and the formerly blind man
- And finally between Jesus and the formerly blind man

Everyone in the story has some knowledge that they think they know, and yet what they really want to know is that what they think they know can really be true. Ya know?

So let's take a look at our questions.

- What do we, or can we know for sure?

You might think that the answer to this first question is nothing. The story is so confusing and riddle like, full of twists and turns, that we cannot know anything for sure. But I think there are a couple of things that we absolutely can know for certain:

Just because something makes sense in our human understanding of the way we think things ought to work in the world, doesn't mean that that is how God operates. Our human understanding of justice would indicate people get what they deserve, but we see evidence that that is just not true. Good people get cancer or coronavirus, and so do bad people. And bad people don't always get caught. But this we know, as I said earlier: Scripture says that our Father in Heaven loves all his creation so much that he "makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous." (Matthew 5:45)

And it's a good thing that we don't get what we ask for "since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23) and "he does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities." (Psalm 103:10).

What Jesus demonstrated in this story was that the man born blind wasn't blind because of his sin or his parent's sin. He was just born blind. Bad stuff happens.

- Does God revealed in Jesus Christ want to be known?

Jesus answered that question twice in this lengthy passage. The first time is in verse 3 ff. where he not only calls himself "the light of the world," but then demonstrates his divine nature by healing the blind man. Who can do something like that except God?

And the second time he answered this question, "Does God revealed in Jesus Christ want to be known?" is verse 35 ff. where the formerly blind man finally had a visual encounter with the one who healed him. In this dialogue, Jesus asked the man if he believed in the Son of Man? Of course, the formerly blind man has never seen Jesus, so he asked, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him."³⁷ Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he."

Why, in this story, does Jesus seem reveal his true identity and not in others, remains a mystery. But that he is the "light of the world", a divine being with the power of God to do good, and the self-revealed "Son of Man" is clear.

- How is it that God revealed in Jesus Christ seems to know us so well?

This question is answered by the divine nature of Jesus Christ in response to the disciple's human experience of life that is contrary to the way God operates.

Jesus knows us so well because he is Emmanuel, God with us. Jesus saw a man who was not whole as God had created him to be, and he used the opportunity to right this wrong as a way to both bring glory to his Father in Heaven and to reveal just a little of who he truly is.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

Throughout this 2020 Lenten series "Journey with Jesus through John" we will hear stories of Jesus doing something and all we can do is observe him. He does not teach a particular lesson and then ask us to "go and do likewise." It would appear that what we are to do during Lent is simply observe him.

But that doesn't mean there is nothing for us to do.

The first thing I would like us to notice is that we are often blind to the presence of Christ in our midst. We go through life and we observe a situation and how it gets resolved and we think to ourselves, "What a coincidence!"

And the opposite is also often true. We go through life and we observe a situation and how it does not get resolved and we think to ourselves, "Why doesn't someone do something?"

I submit to you that both scenarios are likely the activity of the Holy Spirit of Christ at work in our midst.

And I would further encourage us to take notice in those same types of situations of what we can do to be Christian, little Christ's in those situations. Especially in today's COVID-19 pandemic environment, we should be asking ourselves, "When bad stuff happens, what can I do to be Christ in that situation? What can I do to bring light to this darkness?"

You've probably seen the same little vignettes on the news that I have seen that are simple little acts of kindness to friends and neighbors, grocery store workers and first responders, all whom along with us are affected by this evil bug that will infect the good and bad, the godly and the ungodly.

In his famous Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told those in attendance that:

"You are the light of the world. ... let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." (Matthew 5:14, 16)

I encourage you all to take the necessary precautions to stay safe and healthy, but along the way, if you can be the light of Christ for someone safely, or bring light to darkness safely, then I would encourage to do that.

Prayer

O God of the godly and ungodly, of the light and the darkness. We give you praise and thanks that you operate with only divine wisdom and justice. Inspire us to

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observe your Son and our Lord Jesus Christ, follow his example in the actions we take, and bring light to the dark places of our world. We pray this in his name.
Amen