

A 2014 John 9:1-41 Lent 4
14-03-30 4th Sunday in Lent

God's beloved people, grace and peace to you in the name of our crucified and risen Savior,
Jesus Christ.....Amen.....

When I was a freshman in high school I took debate class. In February of that year one of our assignments was to participate in a speech contest sponsored by the Optimist Club – their mission says: *By providing hope and positive vision, Optimists bring out the best in kids.* The theme of the contest was something like, “The Future of America.” I had no idea what to write. It felt like they wanted me to try to see into the future. So I wrote this long, boring speech about how we would end up living in domed cities after a nuclear war.... It was horrible and completely missed the point of the contest. But I won second place in the boys division.

Why? Well, besides the fact that there were only two boys entered,... while everyone else in the room was snickering, one of the judges saw my ignorance as caricature or sarcasm or allegory. In the early 80s we kids just assumed that one day we would suffer through a nuclear war,... and we grew up on the science-fiction images of Star Wars, Star Trek, and Buck Rodgers. This judge heard “domed cities” and saw all the resignation and despair that lived inside that 9th grade boy. Now THAT's an Optimist....

Random fact about seeing: There are 5 different words in Greek that we just translate as “see,” and there are 18 permutations of those words.

Our gospel lesson for today tells the story of missing the point... and blindness... and seeing on so many levels. It's a long story with all kinds of angles, but a quick summary is: Jesus loved and healed a blind man.... Okay, a little better summary might be: Jesus sees and heals a blind man; the neighbors, Pharisees, parents, and Pharisees again can't see what to do with the Seeing man, or Jesus; the man is driven out of the presence of the Pharisees – and the synagogue; Jesus returns, strengthens the Seeing man's faith, and teaches in paradox.

Random fact about seeing: in the first 8 verses of our gospel reading today, John uses 3 out of the 5 words for see.”

Since we translate the 3 different Greek words into English as the same word: to see, right off the bat, we're at a disadvantage because we can't see the subtext. We don't know that the very first verse sets the stage for the whole story: *As he walked along, Jesus saw a man blind from birth.* We think, “Okay, Jesus came across a blind man, let's get this story going.”

What we can't know... is that what John is telling us is: “As Jesus walked along, he came across a blind man and on the spot, he endeavored to become involved in this man's life, to participate in his situation, to share an experience.” But all we get is “He saw a man...” Of course we can guess that when Jesus shows up, he's going to transform things.

The next people to see the man are his neighbors. They're all confused because when he was blind, they would see him every day as the beggar. But now that the man is Seeing, they aren't sure that it's him. The word that John uses HERE for “see” means “to notice.” When he was blind they only noticed a beggar, but never saw him as a person, as one who mattered, as one whom God might actually care about.

Random fact about seeing: God says to Samuel, *for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.*

The neighbors, like the disciples and everyone else back then, believed that if you had some kind of condition that was out of the ordinary, then you had sinned in some way to deserve

this affliction from God. It was your fault. “*Teacher, who sinned to cause his blindness?*” But there are all kinds of blindness going on here: the disciples are blinded by the theology they had been taught. Jesus says, “It wasn’t the man or his parents; the reason he is blind is so that God’s glory will show forth, be revealed, be seen in him today.”

In this world that God created, not everyone is the same – there are those who are blind, those who cannot hear, those who have a leg or an arm that is shorter than their other leg or arm, some of us need glasses or hearing aids, or braces, or we fight cancer, or high blood pressure, or we are in a wheelchair. And these are just things that we notice on the outside. There is a whole internal realm that we cannot see.... Some people take Jesus’ answer to mean that it’s God’s doing that the man was born blind. But what the text says is that today, his power would be shown. God can take the blame or credit for the variations that occur in the world, even if we and the neighbors can’t see people for who they really are.

Random fact about seeing: Seeing is more important in John than hearing.

The third group to see the man-who-is-now-able-to-see is the Pharisees. And a third word is put to use by John. This word has mostly to do with the physical ability to see, it’s concerned that the eyes actually function. The Pharisees, being technicians of the law, are mostly concerned with what they can see... and what they saw didn’t conform to the law because Jesus healed this man on the Sabbath. That just wasn’t done. In the eyes of the Pharisees, both this man and Jesus are by definition, sinners! It’s in the law, it’s clear for all to see, even though the Pharisees wonder amongst themselves because how could a sinner such as this do such a powerful sign? They find themselves struggling with the tradition of the law and their theology just like the disciples had been. What are they to do?? The Seeing man must be someone else, so they call in the parents who know that the man is their son... but they don’t want anything to do with him because they have their status in the synagogue to worry about – the very place that their son winds up being thrown out of.

The Seeing man gets called back, and speaks what might be the most troubling and most freeing word in the whole story today: *God doesn’t listen to sinners!!!* Until that day, everyone believed that God didn’t listen to people whom the Pharisees would judge and condemn as “sinners.” But if that were the case, we’d all be better off to pack it in – sleep in on Sundays, forget about loving your neighbor, or enemy.... But Jesus himself rewrites the law by showing up with transformation in mind, and doesn’t listen to the protests of the sinning Pharisees, he shows healing grace on the man anyway.

Random fact about seeing: the TDNT dedicates over 50 pages to the word “see.”

After the seeing man finds himself back on the street, Jesus seeks him out, and 37 verses after Jesus saw him and entered into this man’s life, John brings us full circle using the same word for “see” that he hasn’t used since verse 1. “*Do you believe in the Son of Man?... Who is he sir, that I may believe in him.... You have seen him, and the one speaking to you is he.... Lord, I believe.*” Transformation!

When all is said and done, at the end of the story and a very long day, the only one who sees, really sees... is the man who had once been blind. He sees because of Jesus. And WE may see any number of things – that there are all kinds and manner of blindness. That this story, as the one with Nicodemus and the one with the Samaritan woman, comes at us on multiple levels. That Jesus once again teaches using paradox. Saying that he came into the world “for judgment,” not that he’s here to judge us, but that in his coming, people would judge him – some, like the Pharisees in their blindness will judge him wrongly, even though the religious

establishment of the day thought that the Pharisees were “all-seeing.” And others who were considered to be unknowing and blind, would see Jesus most clearly as he comes to us.

Random fact about seeing: to see is to participate in and experience the life of another.

So as we read this story about Jesus, a blind man, and blind people all around, and we should want to be considered among the blind..... It's odd,... but only in Christ do we see, so I say cling to the Pharisaical title “blindness,” that Jesus will once again come to you to really see you. To participate in your life. To show you the Son of Man.

Jesus DOES hear the prayers of sinners.

He DOES open the eyes of the blind.

He DOES give you eyes to see,

he DOES take away your sin,

he DOES transform your life. Only in Jesus do you really see.

Amen.....