

Fourth Weekend in Lent (RCL/A): "Once I Was Blind, and Now I See"  
Ephesians 5:8-14; John 9:1-41  
March 18-19, 2023  
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Please raise your hand if you've ever used eye drops or salve. Now keep that hand raised if you've ever used eye drops or salve on a Sunday, our Christian "sabbath." Lemme just say that would be a **big** problem, if we were Jews living in Jesus' time. Any "anointing" of the eye came under the umbrella of **work**, which meant **violation** of Sabbath laws. Jesus was in a heap of trouble for "anointing" the eyes of the man blind from birth, especially because He did it with mud made from dirt and spit. Jesus had to "knead" spit and dirt to make the healing mud compress for the blind man's eyes, and "kneading" was forbidden on the Sabbath. If the man's life were in danger, an exception would be made for whatever "work" was necessary to save him, but this was another instance where the Pharisees figured that anyone who'd been blind his whole life could wait one more day, like the woman who'd been bent over for 18 years, or the man in the synagogue with the withered hand, both of whom Jesus also healed on the Sabbath and also got flak for.

In the Gospels we don't get many extended dialogues other than those between Jesus and His disciples or Jesus and others. Today's Gospel is an exception, because there's quite a conversation between the newly healed man and the Pharisees, and between the Pharisees and the man's parents. Ray Brown, a Scripture scholar who spent a lifetime studying this Gospel, says that the back-and-forth between the Pharisees and the once-blind fellow "is one of the most cleverly written dialogues in the New Testament."<sup>1</sup>

When neighbors and onlookers notice that the guy they knew as the blind beggar on the corner isn't blind anymore, they ask him what happened, and he tells them what "*the man called*

*Jesus*” did (John 9:11). Then when the Pharisees first question him, he calls Jesus *“a prophet”* (John 9:17). The second time he asks if they *“also”* want to become Jesus’ disciples, and puts it right out there that *“If this man were not from God, he could do nothing”* (John 9:33). The formerly blind man is fearless in stating what he *“sees”* as the truth, and unlike his parents is not afraid to antagonize the Pharisees, which he’s clearly doing, because they throw him out.

Yet another beautiful detail in this magnificent story is that Jesus hears what happened to the fellow and immediately goes and finds him. He doesn’t ask, *“So, tell me what you think of the world, now that you can see it!”* He doesn’t wonder, *“What’s it like to see the faces of your loved ones?”* or, *“Have you seen a reflection of yourself yet, maybe in the pool where I sent you?”* or, *“What are you going to do with your life now?”* He asks him, *“Do you believe in the Son of Man?”* (John 9:35). I’m thinking I would’ve wanted to please the guy who just performed a miracle for me, and I would’ve said, *“You betcha!”* even if I had **no** idea **what** it meant to believe in the Son of Man. But he’s a very thoughtful, self-assured fellow, and he responds, *“And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him”* (John 9:36).

*“You have seen him, and the one who is speaking with you is he.”*

*“Lord, I believe.” And he worshiped him. (John 9:37-38)*

This man has a lovely openness to Jesus, which the Pharisees sadly lack. At every step in this story the door of his heart **opens** a little more, while at every juncture the doors of the Pharisees’ hearts **close** a little more. He who was blind now can see, both physically and spiritually. They who think they see all things, especially the things of faith, so clearly become spiritually blind.

In the Fourth Gospel we hear about the *“signs”* that Jesus performs: turning water into wine at Cana, feeding the five-thousand-plus with 5 loaves and 2 fish, giving sight to the man born

blind, and next week we'll hear how He raises Lazarus from the dead. These physical miracles are certainly expressions of Jesus' compassion, but they're so much more. Their most important job is to move people to faith. For instance, if the recipients of the healings simply went back to life-as-usual, the healings would have been medical successes but spiritual failures. But if they come to recognize Jesus as "*the Savior of the world*," like our Samaritan friends called Him last week (John 4:42), then these signs, these miracles, have fulfilled their true purpose.

So where are we in all this?? Are we humble and smart enough to admit that God isn't finished with us yet? That we may not be physically blind but we certainly all have blind spots that the Holy Spirit would like to enlighten? None of us this side of Heaven has 20/20 vision, **spiritually**. It's part of the human condition that we tend toward spiritual "nearsightedness," seeing most clearly what affects us and those closest to us, but having rather fuzzy awareness of suffering beyond our immediate experience. We lack spiritual "peripheral" vision. Like the priest and the Levite in the parable of the Good Samaritan, we often choose to put on blinders to block out situations we'd rather not see or rather not become involved in. Jesus offers us corrective lenses!

In this weekend's reading from Paul's letter to the Ephesians (5:14) we hear a snippet of an early Christian anthem:

*"Sleeper, awake!  
Rise from the dead,  
and Christ will shine on you."*

Being "woke" has a negative connotation in some circles these days, but being "awakened" by Christ is a very good thing. As Christians we are called to become more and more Christ-like. Compassion and passion for justice are Christ-like qualities, for sure.

For example: this week there was an article in the paper about the repatriation (return to rightful owners) of Native American artifacts taken from the site of the Wounded Knee massacre. There were photos of some of the objects: a red and white beaded medicine ball, a beautifully painted pouch called a parfleche, a leather sheath for a whetstone (used to sharpen knives), and most sadly, a cradleboard cover, a doll, a child-sized pair of moccasins, reminding us that not just Native American braves and white cavalymen were killed at Wounded Knee, but squaws and children, too. In a cloud of cultural blindness in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, these battleground relics became part of a traveling shoe salesman's display to attract curious customers. He eventually donated them to the little museum in his small town of Barre, Massachusetts, near Worcester.

The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act was passed in 1990 and requires museums and colleges that receive federal funds to return human remains and items of "cultural heritage" to the indigenous nations to which they belong.<sup>2</sup> The relics from Wounded Knee come from the Oglala Sioux, and members of that tribe have worked to convince the museum in Barre to transfer the objects back to them. For years the museum had cited the letter of the law, noting that it does **not** federal funds and was **not** required to give up any of its holdings. They were challenged to follow the spirit of the law and to listen to their better angels: "You can be an inspiration to others or you can be the next generation of perpetrators."<sup>3</sup>

The museum let go of the items late last year. On Dec. 29 a group of Oglala Sioux brought the boxes containing the objects to Wounded Knee, prayed over them, poured chokeberry juice on the ground by them, and placed wasna, a native ground meat dish, on top of the 2 feet of snow covering the site. The person who had driven the heritage items from Massachusetts to South Dakota is Cedric Broken Nose, a descendant of Chief Spotted Elk killed at Wounded Knee in 1890, one among about 300 Lakota men, women and children. Reflecting on his sacred role in bringing

these items home, he said with wonder, “All these generations passed by... and somehow it came to me and my generation.”<sup>4</sup> The tribe will decide what to do with these artifacts. Traditionally the possessions of those who died were burned. Some of these returned objects may be burned, some may be buried, some saved for educational purposes, some used in religious ceremonies, like a shirt used in the Ghost Dance.

The museum board ultimately had its blinders removed and did the right thing, the compassionate thing, the just thing. It’s a good example of how we come to new cultural awareness in each generation, and how God isn’t finished yet with **any** of us. A museum board member said, “it became clear to her that the collection had more significance to the Lakota people than it did to Barre residents.” “We decided that anything they wanted to have, they can have.”<sup>5</sup> I read that and thought, “So if the items meant as much to your local residents as to the Oglala Sioux you wouldn’t have returned what rightfully belonged to them?” But the Lord lifts **our** blindness gradually, unlike the man whose sight came all at once. All I can do is say to myself and pray to God:

*“Sleeper, awake!  
Rise from the dead,  
and Christ will shine on you.”*

I’m quite sure God isn’t finished with me yet. Amen

<sup>1</sup>Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII* (Anchor Bible, Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), p. 377.

<sup>2</sup>Julia Jacobs and Kayla Gahagan, “Tribes Weigh the Future of Plundered Trophies” (*NY Times*, March 17, 2023, A1, A12), A1.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid, A12.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

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