

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

March 2, 2008

Lenten 4A 2008

In the Name of our one living God, ever creating, ever loving, and ever sustaining: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

When Bishop Fitzpatrick was here the Sunday before last, he said that he avoids preaching on John – the language is strange and the structure of the Last Gospel is complex and difficult. That is true enough. So, I asked myself, why then does the lectionary year in and year out give us so much John during Lent and after Easter? As complicated as John is, he gets to the heart of who Jesus is and why we should care. The readings from John surround Easter to inform us of the meaning of those three days long ago in Jerusalem that we will soon commemorate and celebrate.

So what are we to make of today's lesson that is filled with sin, folk medicine, miracle cures, Pharisees and ancient purity codes? If that isn't complex enough, what are we to make of a story that is set in Jesus' times but that actually concerns the problems that John's community faced one hundred years later? I found the way that made the most sense to me was to treat it as a play, as a drama that has a lot of action surrounding the journey of a dispossessed and abandoned soul who found his way home to God in and through Jesus Christ.

The story opens with Jesus and his disciples encountering a man who was blind since birth. The disciples ask Jesus, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" The question assumes that we know that under the law blindness or any serious maiming rendered a person impure under the Law and thus unfit to enter the Temple. Such a condition was thought to be a punishment by God for some sin. That was a common belief in the first century and is still believed by many today. Let's face

it, sometimes we still go there rather than face the fact that life can be both uncertain and unfair. A child born blind would mean the sins of the parents were visited by God on the child – it is a very biblical concept but also one which most thinking people reject today as being both unscientific and theologically unsound. The consequences of our actions can indeed extend beyond ourselves, but they have nothing to do with the worth of another human being in the eyes of God.

In today's lesson, Jesus mixes some saliva and dirt and spreads the mud on the man's eyes telling him to go to the pool of Siloam and wash his eyes. When the neighbors see the blind beggar who has now regained his sight some doubted it could be the same man and others asked how this could be? The man replied simply that "the man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes and told me to go wash and I received my sight." This was big news and you can imagine the Jerusalem equivalent of the coconut wireless going into overdrive on this one.

The buzz got the attention of the religious authorities and they question the parents as to whether the man is their son and how is it that now he sees? John tells us the parents were frightened and intimidated by the Pharisees since they would throw people out of the synagogue (that is out of the community) who believed in Jesus. The parents, out of fear, deflect the question back to their son who is of age to give testimony himself.

Now we get to the conflict. The authorities again try intimidation: "Tell the truth," They say, "we know this man is a sinner"– the sin being doing work on the Sabbath by making mud and healing the man. The man replies, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know is that though I was blind, now I see." I'm really getting to like this guy. Unlike his parents, he is not about to be bullied by authority. The Pharisees demand that he tell the story again. Now I'm really liking this guy – he

goes from refusing to be bullied to directly challenging authorities who contradict the reality he knows. “Why?” he asks, “I’ve told you already. Do you want to become his disciples too?”

That drives them into frenzy. They revile him saying “We follow Moses and we know God has spoken to Moses, but we don’t know where this Jesus comes from!” Now the man moves from challenging them to directly contradicting them. Remember, now, the Pharisees were the educated and privileged authorities in his community and he is just some poor former beggar. He uses their logic: if God does not listen to sinners but only to those who do God’s will, how is it that this man can do what has never been done in the world before? If he were not from God he could do nothing.” The result is as angry and violent as it is predictable – they curse him as a sinner and apostate and throw him out because they cannot have anything to do with such an impure and irreligious person.

But is he left alone to his own devices? No. It is now that Jesus comes to him. I think this is important – when alone and reviled and most vulnerable, Jesus comes to him! I think it is often true that if at the difficult times in life we can get beyond ourselves and acknowledge our pain and vulnerability, we will find that we are not alone and the Christ is right there with us.

If the other scenes appear like scenes from a trial, now comes the judgment. Jesus offers the man faith and not just faith but a place in a new community as a fellow follower of the way of the Son of Man. He is given not just his sight but what John calls “light” – perceiving the will of God in the life of Christ and he is given a home, a place in a community. It is the Pharisees who are judged blind and hence, by the rules of their own system, sinners.

I think this story resonates with every culture and age. Culture - and religion especially – are often used to intimidate people into being blind to reality and, if this fails, silencing people to agree with those in power. I grew up in New England in the 1950s. There was one black family in town and one Jewish storekeeper. I believed the stereotypes fed to me because I had no other experience or knowledge of my own. Life then was designed to keep it that way. Raised a Catholic, I can't begin to tell you the stories I heard about the Protestants. It wasn't until 8th grade when I was making food at the Red Cross for the hurricane victims with the nice ladies from the Methodist and Congregational Church that I learned what I was being taught wasn't true.

Jesus challenged the fundamentalist literalism of the religious Pharisees when he placed human need and compassion ahead of the Law and healed a man with mud on the Sabbath. The cured blind man rejected the authority of those who told him he was full of sin for being born blind. His sight restored and seeing clearly, he rejected a society that would forever deem him unfit to worship God and consign him to the outermost fringes of that society.

Perhaps the point of this lesson is that we have a living God, one who is still creating in an ever changing world. We have a living Christ who has promised to be always with us to heal and to feed and to teach us. We have a living Spirit within and around us that sustains us eternally. The fear mongers and stone throwers in our churches, governments and neighborhoods can have their say, but in the end, they are no match for reality and the God who creates it.

Let us pray: Lord, give us true sight. When we look at the world, let us look through the eyes of Christ and allow us to see the world as it truly is and as you would have it be. Amen.