

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday in Lent 2011

Another long reading from the Gospel of John--filled with metaphors--today we have “seeing” as a metaphor for believing. Last week it was water and “living water,” and light and darkness as used in both stories of the Samaritan woman at the well and the story of Nicodemus. John tells this story of seeing and not seeing, believing and not believing to an early Christian community that has been thrown out of their synagogues by the religious authorities. They have learned that sometimes conversion and belief bring judgment, rejection, and condemnation. John also pairs the sinner with the “not a sinner” in the story. Will all of the real sinners please stand. I am waiting!!! As if it was up to me or you to judge! Notice that it is the disciples who ask Jesus for a judgment first. Who is the real sinner, this man or his parents? There just has to be someone to blame. Can we find ourselves in the blind man’s experience or are we more like the disciples or the Pharisees?

It might seem ironic that both the disciples and the Pharisees want to make a connection between bad things that happen and sin. “God must have been pretty mad at someone, the disciples say, so who messed up--this fellow or his folks? As Scott Hoezee sees it, we generally operate on the principle of *quid pro quo*, or tit for tat. If something really good happens in someone’s life, we generally don’t connect it with God, but we do see God often as the dispenser of punishment.

There will be a few in our congregation that will do just like the neighbors of the blind man and take the news that the search committee has received the candidate list (a wonderful thing for the life of this parish) and press the search committee for more information, for details, rather than praise God, trust the Holy Spirit and give thanks. Isn’t it easier to say that something is too good to be true and base our identity on what has gone before rather than on who God call us to be today?

Here are some thoughts about blindness from those who encountered blindness in their every day lives.

Thomas Hardy remarked: “There is a condition worse than blindness, and that is seeing something that isn’t there.”

Samuel Butler: “A blind man knows he cannot see, and is glad to be led, though it be by a dog; but he that is blind in his understanding, which is the worst blindness of all, believes he sees as the best, and scorns a guide.”

Helen Keller: “My darkness has been filled with the light of intelligence, and behold, the outer day-lit world was stumbling and groping in social blindness.”

Paul Gauguin the painter: “I shut my eyes in order to see”

Scott Hoezee in his commentary on the gospel reminded me of a scene in the movie “Unforgiven.” There is a young gun-slinger who is trying to convince himself that he hasn’t done anything wrong by killing another man as he muses aloud, “I reckon he had it coming to him.” In response, Clint Eastwood’s character replies, “We all got it coming to us, kid.” It is too easy to see someone suffer and conclude, “Well, he got what he deserved, got what he asked for. She smoked too much, he ate at McDonalds too often, he engaged in high-risk sex, she didn’t take her medications, he wouldn’t listen to his parents, he had it coming to him, she got what she asked for.. (And by the way, I’m glad I’m not like that!)”

“If the gospel contains good news, it is that by God’s grace ...none of us get what we otherwise deserve.” Does it mean that we never warn someone of the potential consequences of this or that action, or draw conclusions as to what might have brought about a given tragedy? No, but it does mean that we should never do so from a position of spiritual superiority, or that we somehow know for sure, any cause-and-effect relationship.

Rick Morley reminds of the need to get our hands dirty if we are to be the hands of Jesus bringing healing to the world. Jesus reached down into the dirt, spit into his own hands, and slathered mud onto the man’s eyes. God reached into the ground and gave us his breath that we might live. He lifted us out of the earth in the Beginning, and is still in the business of lifting us up, opening our eyes, and bringing us life. There are a lot of broken lives out there that need to be picked up too, in our community, in Haiti, Sudan, New Zealand, Libya, Israel/Palestine, Japan, and other whole countries across the world.

As Rick Morley says, “Let’s not look on people like they’re poor slobs, and wonder at how blessed we are. Let’s reach out-into the dirt-if we have to. Let’s dirty our hands. And let’s bring the Life that Jesus brings.” Amen.