

Fourth Sunday in Lent
Year A, RCL
March 22, 2020
North Fork Ministries
Gospel:
John 9:1-41

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

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

The 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 and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" His parents answered, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but 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." His 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. Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him."

So 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." He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" He 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?" Then they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as

for this man, we do not know where he comes from." The man answered, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" And they drove him out.

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

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If you are a mother, or have experienced one like mine, you probably know something about "mother spit". Long before Coronavirus made hand sanitizers and disinfecting wipes a ubiquitous presence among us my mother practiced the art of using saliva to keep her children's faces clean. Whenever I had managed to make myself unpresentable, perhaps with the residue of a grape snow cone running down my chin, or the chocolaty remains of a Snicker bar creeping from the corners of my mouth, my mother would extract a lace handkerchief from her purse, moisten a fold in the handkerchief with her tongue, and scrub my face clean, employing a method reminiscent of that used by a mother cat bathing her kittens. I can still recall the smell of her scented handkerchief and it's coarse texture, as well as her spittle's dampness, infused with the sweetness of her breath. She firmly held my shoulder with her free hand as I twisted and turned, resisting her insistent display of motherly concern for, at least the appearance, of her offspring's cleanliness.

You know, I never asked my mother to receive the face washing she inflicted upon me - just as the blind man didn't come to Jesus asking that his sight be made whole. Jesus, upon seeing the man born blind since birth, called him, spat on the ground, made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" And the blind man could see. A clearer example of grace doesn't exist in scripture. Grace unasked, but freely given. "I once was lost, but now I'm found, was blind, but now I see."

I'm struck by the fitful flurry of persistent inquiry whirling around this blessed healing. Blind themselves to the miraculous nature of what had unfolded before them, the authorities doubted that this could be the same man - questioning his parents, asking the blind man again and again about Jesus, "What did he do and

how did he do it? Finally concluding that the formally blind man, and his healer Jesus, were both unreliable sinners.”

And the once-blind man, caught up in the inquiry, struggled to explain what had happened to him. When the Pharisees asked him how he had received his sight. He simply concludes, "He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see."

Throughout John's gospel, what is elsewhere referred to as a miracle, is called by John a "sign" - a sign that points beyond the healing moment itself – revealing something about the illuminating nature of the event and of the Christ.

My first full semester in seminary I rented part of a house on street called Liberty, from a blind man called Ryan. I don't know how representative Ryan is of the visually impaired. He is the only blind man that I've known well. The blind could often be seen in this Austin neighborhood, since the School for the Blind was located only a few blocks away. Trainers and volunteers could often be seen patiently walking beside anxious men and women wearing dark sunglasses and tentatively tapping the sidewalk with their slender white canes, exploring the fearful inches that lay ahead of them. These were the newly blind – or perhaps the newly schooled in the art of living blindly in a world that thinks it can see.

My landlord Ryan was a longtime graduate of the School for the Blind, having entered a world of darkness some 50 years earlier. I don't know what Ryan was like as a younger man, fresh out of college, his future as bright as the sun. I can't say how he reacted when he learned that a disease he had known since birth would soon leave him forever sightless. Perhaps he was angry, resentful, raging against God and the fate that had befallen him. Perhaps, confronted with the inverse situation of the blind man in the gospel reading who had gained his sight, he and those around him sought desperately to understand how such a thing could ever be and what such a sign could ever mean.

But the Ryan I knew was a graduate of the School for the Blind – Magna Cum Laude, I think. Bruises and scrapes and an occasional bloodied nose were a normal aspect of Ryan's countenance, a consequence of his insistence on moving boldly through life. He was forever plunging forward, frequently clashing in his perpetual night, with trees and signs and whatever obstacles his tapping cane failed to detect. Moving through life unafraid is not without consequence, but Ryan had learned that cowering in fear of what lay ahead was a far more fearsome prospect.

Most everyone in the neighborhood knew Ryan, often assisting him when he and his young and still-learning seeing eye dog, a young Labrador Retriever, had led them into unknown territory.

Ryan was the proud owner of a vintage VW convertible. He smiled a sly smile, and I always imagine that there is a twinkle in Ryan's hidden eyes, whenever he invited a neighbor to go for a spin in his convertible. The prospect of going for a

drive with a blind man, tends to take people by surprise. "I drive by Braille," Ryan would explain.

We delighted in these rides through the streets and allies of Austin. I would sit in the back with the Golden Lab. Ryan sat up front in the passenger seat, feeling the breeze, absorbing the sun's rays, smiling in perfect contentment. His girlfriend, Jane, a bit of a wild woman, coaxed every ounce of speed she could from the old air-cooled engine, winding the motor through every gear, accelerating at every turn, sending the dog and me slamming against one another, all of us - sighted and blind, man and beast, happy to be alive and in each other's company.

If you find your way to the Austin neighborhood where Ryan lives and the smell of migas and breakfast tacos compels you to visit Red River Café, you will find, hanging on the diner's south wall, a simple oil painting of Ryan, Jane and his Labrador Retriever riding in their faded blue VW. Ryan has never seen the painting, but he can describe it to you. It depicts a scene that none of his friends or neighbors have seen either, yet it is still very familiar. Jane, Ryan, and the Golden dog are all aboard the VW Beetle. As usual they are speeding down Liberty Street, everyone's hair blowing in the breeze, the Golden Lab is grinning widely, but you realize that this is the Kingdom of Heaven, because the dog is in the backseat, Jane is a passenger, and Ryan is at the wheel.

It was of one such as the blind man Ryan that Jesus spoke when he said, "I came into this world ... so that those who do not see, may see, and those who do see may become blind." Our failure to fully embrace life is a kind of blindness, symptomatic of our inability to see the richness of God's providence.

"All I know," the blind man told the authorities, "is that I was blind and now I see."

Jesus invites us all to be students in his School for the Blind. It's a school where the sighted learn that they are blind, and where the blind can learn to see. Paul was looking for prospective students in the School for the Blind when he wrote in his letter to the Ephesians:

Sleeper, awake!
Rise from the dead.
And Christ will shine on you.

The light shines brightly in our midst. We have a tendency, a natural reflex, when the suns very brightly, to close our eyes, or to squint. The light of the world shines brightly here and now and we are given a choice – to embrace the light, to open our eyes fully to the brightness of the world around us, or to narrow our focus, blinding ourselves to the unlimited possibilities that surround us. May we let the light shine in.