

Sermon for March 22, 2020

Lent 4A, John 9:1-41

When we came up with our theme of “Within and Without” for the season of Lent, we could not have predicted that we would be doing our worship *within* the confines of our own homes. That the recommendation from healthcare professionals and even the government would be for us to remain *within* as much as possible. That going *without* of our homes would be something that produced so much anxiety and fear. Or that we would be going *without* so many of the things we take for granted, especially our ability to connect with others through our regular routines. But now this pandemic has forced us to withdraw from the world. From schools, workplaces, entertainment venues, even from our churches. This was not what we were thinking when we came up with the “Within and Without ‘of Lent, but then again “Self-Quarantine” wouldn’t have fit in the logo on our bulletin.

In the reading from John’s gospel there is a lot of action going. If we were to stage this as a play, we’d have characters moving quite quickly in and out of the scene in snippets of interactions. There’s the man born blind and his initial interaction with Jesus and the disciples, who wonder whether it was sin that caused the man’s afflictions. The man exits stage left to go wash in the pool of Siloam before coming back and meeting a group of incredulous neighbors. When they meet the man out of context, they cannot believe it is really him. So, they take him to the religious authorities, who have the ability to declare him truly healed, but will not believe unless his parents vouch for him. Enter the parents, who make a somewhat comical retort that their adult son should speak for himself, when they are put on the spot by the religious leaders. And the farcical interplay between the religious leaders who want to know how the man was healed but refuse to hear what he has to say about it. Until in exasperation he finally says, “Oh, do you also want to be his disciples then?” Frustrated they kick him out of the synagogue. They move off to the dark corner of

the stage, leaving the man alone with the spotlight on him. Alone until he is approached again by Jesus. Perhaps the most significant interaction in the scene. Because it is in his social isolation that Jesus comes to him and reveals a life-altering truth. And the man bows down and worships.

This might have been the end of the scene except in overhearing the conversation between Jesus and the man, the religious leaders ask themselves a poignant question: “Surely we are not blind, are we?”

There are a lot of questions swirling about in this scene. In the midst of things that were difficult to understand, the neighbors, disciples, and religious leaders have many wonderings.

From the disciples: “Who sinned to cause this to happen?”

From the leaders: “What do you say about this Jesus?”

From the neighbors: “How does he now see?”

From Jesus to the man: “Do you believe in the son of Man?”

From the man: “Who is [the Son of Man]?”

From the leaders among themselves: “Surely we are not blind, are we?”

These are dark times for many of us. Fears and anxiety grow as day by day our lives are shifting because of a virus we cannot see and know little about. Schools are closed, workplaces are going remote if they can, people are shut in their homes, stores are out of toilet paper – toilet paper! Even weddings and funerals are on hold pending an unknown future time when things can get back to “normal.” Or at least what will be a new normal. I can imagine people in this moment of global crisis asking some of the same questions. Who sinned that this is happening? Where can we place fault? How do I know if I’m part of the problem?

For the first time, having read this gospel passage numerous times before, I heard the concerns of the man's parents in a new way. Before they were bit characters to me. But now in this moment in time, their fears are highlighted. And they are real. And not insignificant. When asked to give testimony about what Jesus had done for their family, they held back. They could not bear witness because they were afraid that they would lose their connection to the community. They could not imagine what it would be like to be separated from the faith community that means so much in their lives. A faith community that likely supported their little family through the challenges of raising a son with a physical impairment. Just because that reality had changed in an instant, didn't mean their mindset and emotional state could change that quickly.

In a time when life is being altered so quickly there are more important questions than the "how" or "why". What is more important to us as people of faith are the theological questions: What can we say about Jesus in the midst of this? Are we blind to what God is doing even in these challenging times?

The man's parents were so afraid of isolation that they could not see God working in the life of their son. They blinded themselves by the fear of the unknown.

But their son could not be silent about what Jesus had done in his life. Even though he faced the same threat of isolation, he spoke boldly in the face of even the religious authorities. If we consider that he had been somewhat dependent on community his whole life, it wouldn't have been an easy switch for him either. But when God is at work so powerfully in our lives, it can sometimes feel like a night and day, aha moment when we begin to see in new ways.

Jesus tells his disciples that he is about shedding light on a world steeped in night. Healing the man born blind is symbolic of how Jesus wants to open the eyes of all of us, especially when it is hard for us to see how God is working in our lives and in the world. "Surely we

are not blind, are we?” It is for people of faith to help other people answer the question: How is God revealed in this time?

In Lent we have been focusing on three practices – prayer, giving and fasting. This week we look at ways we might be “Giving Without.”

Giving Without of ourselves requires seeing in new ways. When the world faces terrifying realities, Christians rise up and still find ways to be “With” our neighbors. Even if we cannot be physically together as much as before, we can reach out and not stay isolated. We can use the eyes of compassion to see where there are needs in our communities. And we can act in appropriate ways to show God’s love and shed light in darkness. Some children rely on schools for food security. With schools closed maybe some of us can volunteer to help make sure no child goes hungry. Seniors and those with health issues are vulnerable and may be more isolated. Give someone you know a call. If you are able, offer to shop or bring them medications. The unhoused do not have a home to shelter in place. And many of the shelters and food services are closed. Consider donating to Loaves and Fishes, so they can continue to provide in this time of great need.

I encourage you to take some time as you are in your homes to invite God to help you see in new ways. To discern how you can Give Without in this season.

This is uncharted territory for many of us. We have not faced something like this as a society in nearly 100 years. It is unsettling. It is anxiety producing. It is disruptive. But we have a God who does not leave us alone. And we have a witness to give about what Jesus has done in our lives. Let us open our hearts and our eyes of faith to see in new ways.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.