

Sermon March 22

The expression often used these days is ‘uncharted waters.’ It certainly describes the events of today. The news of the day concerning the COVID-19 virus seem to change by the hour. We are human and it is normal to be concerned, worried and scared. However, we are also Christians and we know that God will carry us through this. Lent is a time of study and soul searching as we seek the voice of the Holy Spirit. This is a perfect opportunity to become familiar with the Bible and the teachings of our Lutheran faith.

The Gospel for today is taken from the 9th Chapter of John, verses 1-41. It is a long reading and it is important that you read all of it.

The story begins with Jesus walking in Jerusalem near the pool of Siloam. There were two pools, an upper and lower which were filled by a nearby spring. The steps leading into the pools were recently discovered in 2004. According to early rabbinic tradition, during the celebration of the Festival of Tabernacles, water was drawn from the pool into a golden vessel and carried in procession to the temple.

Many people would have gathered around this pool for various reasons. It was common to find beggars trying to get enough money to survive. When the disciples saw this blind man, they asked Jesus, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” It was common at that time, to believe that unusual sufferings came as a result of someone’s sin. Jewish tradition believed that people sometimes suffered because of their ancestors’ sins and occasionally allowed the possibility of a person sinning before birth.

Nancy Eiesland, Associate Professor of Sociology of Religion at Emory University has written: “Growing up with a disability, I could not accept the traditional interpretations of disability that I heard in prayers, in Sunday School, and in sermons. ‘You are special in God’s eyes,’ I was often told, ‘that’s why you were given this painful disability,’ or, ‘Don’t worry about your suffering now-in heaven you will be made whole.’ This confused me. My disability had taught me who I am and who God is. What would it mean to be without this knowledge?

“My family frequented faith healers with me in tow. I was never healed. People asked about my hidden sins, but they must have been so well hidden that even I misplaced them. The theology that I heard was inadequate to my experience.”

It saddens and amazes me that people still think that way so many centuries later. I went to school with children who had polio or were born missing a limb but I never thought it was anyone's fault.

Jesus responded by saying, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him. As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world."

Most of the work in that time had to be done during daylight because you don't want to waste burning oil at night.

Jesus made a paste and put it on the man's eyes and told him to wash in the pool. For those people who attended our last Lenten Supper, they had a chance to see this in the movie, "Jesus of Nazareth." After the man washed you could see the expression of his face change as he came out of the water and his vision cleared.

Of course, the people who witnessed this miracle, couldn't believe it and said it couldn't be the same man. They questioned him again, "How were your eyes opened?" The man replied, "The man they call Jesus made some mud and put it on my eyes. He told me to go to Siloam and wash, so I went and washed, and then I could see."

It seemed like a straight forward answer. Biblical scholars show that beggars had to learn to endure being refused and looked down on. It was a humiliating profession. The people took him to the Pharisees because when you don't get the answers you want than go to the authorities. They shifted the argument to Jesus and that he cannot be a man of God because he does not keep the Sabbath. Do you see how the crowd is missing the point? The blind man is no longer blind. He can see. How quickly they forgot. They were not satisfied with the authorities so they asked his parents. His parents do not want to be held responsible for his blindness so they say he is of age and he can answer for himself. They certainly do not want to say Jesus is the Messiah or they will be thrown out of the synagogue.

Throughout this interrogation, the once blind man sticks to his story of how he regained his sight. Finally, when Jesus heard the man had been thrown out of the

synagogue, Jesus asks him, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” and the man responded, “Who is he, sir? Tell me that I might believe in him.”

Jesus said, “You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you.”

Then the man said, “Lord, I believe.”

Jesus then said, For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind.”

There are two kinds of blindness; those who are physically blind and have great insight and those who are spiritually blind.

I remember when I was in college, students would say, “I don’t listen to the news. It’s too depressing.” True the news was not always good. But I felt that it was important to know what was going on in the world. It helped me to define what was important to me. Our church youth group had retreats to learn about hunger in the world and how we could make a small difference with the money we raised. We cleaned houses to earn money that bought toys for a child care center several congregations were starting. All of these things taught us that we are not the center of the universe. We depend on each other to make good choices and make the world a better place for everyone. Sometimes we need to wash the mud from our eyes and see as Jesus sees.

All of us are guilty of spiritual blindness. It is hard to turn our heads when we see ads for starving children or abused pets. Very few people have the resources to make a difference in world hunger or other disasters. However, as a group we can make a major difference in the world. It was reported last summer at the Church Wide Assembly, that the Malaria Campaign raised enough money to cut the death rate in half across Africa. That is a big deal. Our churchwide organizations such as Young Adults in Global Mission, Women of the ELCA, and Lutheran World Relief are doing great work to spread the Gospel around the world. The Nebraska Synod Disaster Relief Fund has helped many of the people of Nebraska recover from the floods last year. The work is still continuing.

Today we are in the midst of a crisis and that is why you are reading this sermon at home. The decision was made to cancel worship in our building to help stop the spread of the CORVID-19 virus. This was done out of love for our neighbor to keep all of us healthy. Until recently, there were people who didn’t take the

warnings seriously, and the virus has spread. Taking care of each other is something the whole world has to do.

Bishop Eaton, the Presiding Bishop of the ELCA, said in a speech she gave, that we need to be church for each other. Lent is a time for study and reflection on our faith and what Jesus has done for us. Our two congregations will be working hard to contact our elderly members and anyone who needs some help during this time. There are volunteers in our congregations who will pick up groceries, medications or anything you need to get through this crisis. That is what it means to be church.

If anyone wants Holy Communion, I can visit you in your home or we can set up a time to have you come to the church. There are ways to do this and still protect ourselves.

Use this time to pray more faithfully, and spend time listening to the Holy Spirit for direction. We can still enjoy the fresh air outside just not in a group. Be smart and stay well. Jesus has need of you.