

St James United Church

Message for March 19, 2023

The Fourth Sunday in Lent

“Seeing Anew” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: 1 Samuel 16:1-13; John 9:1-41



I think it must have been challenging to be Jesus' disciple. I imagine one's thoughts following today's encounter, initially reflecting on the day he met Jesus: “Come and see!” he said, when we asked where he was staying. What a day that was! I couldn't get enough. I wanted to learn everything I could. But now? I feel confused half the time, wondering what he's getting at. And defensive too. Is he trying to push my buttons? I mean, what was that answer he just gave us? I thought I was showing him I was open to new ideas when I suggested the man rather than his parents had sinned. But neither? He was blind to reveal God's glory? That makes no sense.”

And it doesn't. Not as long as we use the world's criteria to judge things, and each other. Despite how far we've come making workplaces, homes, churches accessible, in many ways we project that disciple's question onto people with disabilities. We don't name sin as the reason someone is deaf, visually impaired, non-speaking autistic, has cerebral palsy, etc., yet many people with disabilities will tell you there is still judgment, mostly paternalistic pity. It's expressed as an able-bodied person says they're inspired by how well a person with this or that disability does when all they're doing is getting on with their lives. It assumes there is a normative expression of life and so we organize the world based on that. We carry on without thought, mostly overlook what deviates from the “norm”. When confronted with it we judge it as needing to be fixed or to be babied. What people need is to be seen, enabled to participate fully in their lives. That's why Jesus' response was so important. He didn't ignore, pity or chastise the visually impaired man. He saw him and did the only thing he could at the time to help him participate in the community, he gave him his sight.

It's an amazing story of healing but in the end its purpose isn't as a healing story, it's not just about one person receiving sight. It is about how we all “see” – how we see God, the world, ourselves, each other. Jesus is ready to give all of us sight, to help all of us see more clearly. His statement about being the light of the world ties in with the rabbinical story I shared earlier, how I know that the night is ended and the day begun when I can look at anyone and see my sibling. Jesus sees the visually impaired man as a sibling as surely as he did the Samaritan woman in last week's gospel. The trouble with the questioning disciple is that he didn't see a sibling, only a moral problem to be solved. He was as boxed in as the Pharisees who debated among themselves about Jesus' moral life, not seeing him as a sibling either because he didn't follow their understanding of what's allowable on the Sabbath. To them he was a sinner.

The Pharisees in the story saw the world as so many of us have been taught to, as profane, only holy if made as such by a blessing. And they seemed to view humans the same way.

Their own health, wealth, status seemed to them proof that they'd been blessed, the visually impaired man's condition proof he was not, a sinner at birth. Christian teaching on original sin further developed this view, suggesting we are fundamentally flawed by our first parents' disobedience. From this premise it makes sense that when Samuel went to Bethlehem to find a new king, he needed to make holy everyone going to the sacrifice. David, the youngest, was overlooked, not considered worth being blessed so as to be there with his siblings. But then note what happens in the story. When he was summoned to come up, he was presented as is. He didn't need to be made holy first. Samuel anointed him right away. And God was with him.

That's who we all are, created in God's image, formed from mud, like what Jesus smeared on the man's eyes, God breathing into us and sharing the Spirit. That action was baptism as much as the man washing in the pool. It returned him to Eden, joined to a sacred creation from birth with everyone as a sibling, to a time before he was taught to see himself as a sinner and to see creation as profane. He returned able to see as Jesus saw, to speak with the Pharisees with the same strength of conviction as Jesus. It's like last week at the well. As Jesus' openness to the woman helped her be more open to him and others, so his seeing past the sinner narrative the man had been taught helped him come to new awareness of his relationship in God, and so all of our relationship in God as well. We hear this in two "I AM" statements, not just Jesus saying it when he asked the man if he believed in the Son of Man, the Human One, but the man saying it of himself when people questioned if he was who he said he was. As we heard last week, Jesus' saying "I AM" affirmed the nature of his relationship with God, how he participated in God's life and love. The man thus affirms the same, reminds us of who we all are at our most fundamental, not based on whether we fit a "norm", whether we deviate from it, but everyone by our creation able to share as siblings in God's life and love.

I believe this is what Jesus came to share with his disciples, and that's what we all are. It's an idea which may stretch us, it stretches me especially after hearing about "original sin" for so long. When we've been taught our whole lives that we're flawed, moral problems to be solved, then our daily faults reinforce that there is something about us that is off, that needs fixing. But we don't. The healing we need is not to fix something wrong, it is to start loving ourselves, to see that we occasionally "miss the mark" (a more faithful translation of sin in the bible). Then as we love ourselves, we can more fully love others as our siblings, to see and treat them as blessed because we see and treat ourselves that way. Thankfully we aren't alone in this. In congregations like this one, Jesus keeps praying with us, like in Mark when he placed his hands on a man's eyes multiple times for him to see clearly. Here we come together again and again to remind each other that we're blessed as we are, encourage each other to treat everyone like that, to nurture experiences of prayer that help us to really know it in our hearts.

Beloved, it can be a challenge to be a disciple of Jesus. So much of his teaching runs against how the world has been organised. But that's why he needs us to live something different here, to be stretched, to ask questions, to test new ideas, and most especially to keep encouraging each other to see ourselves and each other anew. May we live like we're blessed, we're holy. May we live like everyone is blessed, is holy, all of us siblings in one sacred creation. Amen.