

4th Sunday in Lent
1 Samuel 16:1-13
Psalm 23
Ephesians 5:8-14
John 9:1-41

Note: This sermon was not able to be delivered because of the outbreak of Corona Virus/Covid-19 Pandemic in MN, and the suspension of in-person church service. While portions were written before the acceleration of news of the increasing outbreak, I share this message to help us *see* a better way, even when the outbreak is done.

Here's Mud in Your Eye

By the Rev. Tom Garrison

How are you doing today? If you felt blindsided by the spread of virus that knows no borders, you're not alone. If you were stunned about how quickly shelves emptied, workplaces shuttered and people isolated, you're not alone. *Most* of us didn't see this coming. Well, imagine operating blind all of your adult life.

I was surprised when today's reading strangely reminded me of the first dog that I can remember growing up. Her name was Annie—a gentle giant of a German Shepherd. Looking back, I think of her not so much as a pet, but as a protector.

Why do I associate a German Shepherd with the gospel? Well, first you need to know that Annie was a flunk-out from the **seeing eye dog** school for what we now call *service dogs* for the blind.

Ever since the 1930s, the Seeing Eye school for dogs was headquartered in Morristown, New Jersey.¹ That's where my brother and I were born, and where my Dad's first pastorate after seminary was. Somehow my parents must have made a connection there at the dog school. We adopted Annie. While the dog was unable to maintain the discipline required to make it into service for the blind, she was a kind canine for us kids.

Do you recall the first time you ever encountered a blind person—someone either with a guide dog or with one of those white canes? I do not, but Annie's story, prompted other memories. For instance, when we moved to Illinois, my mother took great pride in reading and recording textbooks for blind students at the University. As the first in her family to go to college, mom wanted to ease their path to learning and remove any obstacles to getting an education.

I suppose you could title today's gospel reading under the heading: **Who Is Really Blind?** Those without sight, or those who refuse to see?



It's rare in our lectionary for us to be called upon to read an entire chapter; even more unusual for it to be devoted to a single subject area. So, this topic of blindness and sight, faith and vision must be an important one for us to spend some time with. The ancients thought so, too.

We know from church historians that this one story of the cured blind man was etched on the walls of first century catacombs, the human-carved chambers underground where Christians buried their dead and held religious observances.ⁱⁱ So, let's explore what's going on in John's account of Jesus and the man blind from birth and how it relates to us, today.

Sadly, even the disciples had a "blame the victim" mentality. When Jesus saw the blind man the disciples assumed, mistakenly, that his blindness was caused by the man's sin, or that of his parents.ⁱⁱⁱ

And yet, Jesus points out that God created *this* person and they must work with him as he is, because he is a work of God, born blind so that God's handiwork can then be revealed in him.^{iv} I like what this passage says about the flaws and limitations of all of us.

In the novel *This Tender Land*, set right here in Minnesota, in the 1930s, there's a Tom Sawyer-like character. A boy named Odie O'Banion laments his many deficiencies, but a kind woman tells him: "Only God is perfect, Odie. The rest of us he gave us all kinds of wrinkles and cracks. If we were perfect, the light he shines on us would just bounce right off. But the wrinkles, the cracks, that's how the light gets inside [of] us."^v

Well, at present, the blind man in our story has no light, except perhaps in his heart. In John's telling, what happens next brings us to the 6th of 7 signs Jesus is to reveal.

Now this part may seem gross to you in a time of Corona Virus (Corvid 19) with all the expert recommendations for reduced physical contact and social distancing. What does Jesus do though? He draws close, then he spits, and he uses the spittle to form kind of a mud pack to spread on the man's eyes.

Before you reject such a treatment out of hand, you should know that the ancients commonly believed that Spittle had medicinal properties. I'm not going to dwell on it, but the healing properties of saliva was already acknowledged by the ancient Greeks more than 2,000 years ago when they applied snake saliva to enhance wound healing. (**Don't try this at home.**) And several studies even in our current decade appear to show that human saliva can reduce inflammation and stimulate oral and skin wound closure. You can look it up.^{vi}

And what of the ground Jesus spat upon? The mud he made? The first recorded use of medicinal clay was noted around 2500 B.C. in Mesopotamia. And Cleopatra was said to have used clays to preserve her complexion. Since ancient times, people have recognized the healing properties of the mud surrounding Israel's Dead Sea. Its "salts" are a complex mix of minerals purported to draw toxins from the body and nourish the skin.^{vii}

Think about the words we use even today in spas with mud *baths*, mud *wraps* or mud *pack* facial masques. We've even inherited the phrase "Here's mud in your eye," when out for a drink and toasting to good health. You won't find those words in the Bible, but the sentiment acknowledges positive aspects of mud, just like the gospel does.

“Now, come on, Rev. Tom, you’re not seriously suggesting, are you, that a man who was congenitally blind could be healed this way without surgery to connect a detached retina or remove whatever defect was causing the man’s blindness are you?” NO. No, I’m not, but I mention these things simply to make the point that the *language* John chose to use in recording these things would not have been unusual to people in those times, even if the final result—*curing* the man’s blindness was virtually unprecedented. “Well, it must have been a divine miracle,” you say. While I have colleagues who don’t believe much in miracles, and while mindful of what modern science can teach us, I take the stance that I won’t underestimate what God can do or how God can do what God does.

But that’s not what intrigues me about this story. It’s the human dimension. First off, when the man returns from bathing, people don’t believe him that he’s found sight. They question him, they interrogate his parents, all of whom stood to lose their membership in the Synagogue if they said Jesus was the Messiah.

Jesus, well before he is dragged before Pontius Pilot is essentially put on trial in absentia. The Pharisees don’t question *him*. They grill the people he helped. And yet, even before Jesus seeks out and finds the man again, after he’s been thrown out of town, he holds fast to the fact that Jesus is a man of God and healed him. “I was blind, but now I see.”

There’s an Ignatian meditation I like very much that makes the point that what the healed man really appreciated was not so much his own vision, but the vision of Jesus: Jesus saw something in *me*. **In me**, and because of that I knew I could face those Pharisees.^{viii}

The Pharisees were so self-assured in their rules and rigidness, that they could not see themselves as spiritually blind. A former blind beggar clearly had his sight, yet because the healing action occurred on the Sabbath day of rest, well this just can’t be allowed! What they failed to see, scholars say, was that Jesus hated the way man-made religion elevated ritual observance over human need, and Jesus never hesitated to break its rules.^{ix} With great pretense the Pharisees positioned *themselves* as the establishment, the great See-ers dictating the rules for everyone else. “Surely, we are not blind, are we?”

I ask you, in what ways, today, do we have our blinders on. What do we fail to see or have true vision for? Do we ignore the basic needs of others for health, for food and clothing, for a safe place to raise their children, for a job with a living wage, for an environment that will sustain life long after we are gone? Do we fail to see how all the peoples of the world are interconnected and depend on each other, that we are called to love everyone—no exceptions?



This last year our world lost an incredible visionary. A young woman of Pentecostal roots, and Episcopalian leanings, Rachel Held Evans wrote before she died:

“What makes the Bible’s miracle stories so compelling is the idea that God cares about people’s suffering, not simply their “spiritual blindness” . . . but also their actual blindness and actual poverty.”

She wrote, “perhaps a better question than “Do I believe in miracles?” is “Am I acting like I do?” Am I including the people who are typically excluded? Am I feeding the hungry and caring for the sick? . . . Am I working to break down religious and political barriers that marginalize ethnic, religious, and sexual minorities and people with disabilities?” ENDQUOTE.^x

Now this was written before we knew of Covid-19, and sure there are lots of barriers right now in our lives. But what can we do now for others, and when things return to normal, what then? Will we be changed by what we’ve been through? Will we act like our eyes have been opened?

Paul tells us in Ephesians that each of “you are light.” Not that you *could* be light, *might* someday be light; you **are** light. Or as one translation puts it: Get on with it; the good, the right, the true. Figure out what will please Christ and then do it. Jesus beat Nike’s sloganeers to the punch—just do it.^{xi}

I began this sermon with an undisciplined dog who made a difference, and a caring mother who read to the blind. Imperfect as we are, we might need to lean on others at times, but the lesson is we, too, can be guides for others.

Let me close with words from the Jewish Sabbath Prayer Book:

Days, pass, and the years vanish,
And we walk sightless among miracles.
Fill our eyes with seeing and our minds with knowing.
Let there be moments when your Presence,
Like lightening, illumines the darkness in which we walk.^{xii}

Lent is the time to have our eyes opened, our commitment questioned, and our faith deepened. Here’s mud in your eye.

Amen.

ⁱ Simply called The Seeing Eye, it is the oldest existing guide dog school in the world. Morris Frank initially opened his school in Tennessee, but quickly relocated it to Whippany, N.J., because the climate in the northeast was more suitable for training dogs. That’s about six miles from Morristown, where I was born. (Seeing Eye later moved to Morristown.) My Dad’s first pastorate after graduating from Drew Theological Seminary, was at the United Methodist Church in Bernardsville, NJ about 9 miles away.

ⁱⁱ According to Lee M. Jefferson, author of *Christ the Miracle Worker in Early Christian Art*, in paintings at the catacombs of Domitilla, Peter and Marcellinus, Christ is depicted as “touching the eyes of his patient.” Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2014, p. 98.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Synthesis*, a weekly resource for preaching and worship in the Episcopal Tradition, March 22, 2020

^{iv} John 9:3

^v *This Tender Land*, William Kent Krueger, set in the summer of 1937 beginning in Minnesota, p. 209.

^{vi} *Journal of Tissue Engineering and Regenerative Medicine*, “Human saliva stimulates skin and oral wound healing in vitro,” June 13, 2019

^{vii} “The Healing Properties of Mud,” *Get Healthy*, Terri Gordon, Apr 20, 2011

^{viii} Loretta Pehanich at *Ignation Spirituality*. Emphasis added.

^{ix} *Synthesis*

^x Rachel Held Evans, *Inspired: Slaying Giants, Walking on Water, and Loving the Bible Again*, Nelson Books, 2018, p. 186. Tragically, the talented, doubt-filled, progressive Christian writer died of brain swelling in 2019 at the age of 37. She leaves behind her husband and two young children. Evans always upheld the values of questioning and being in community.

^{xi} Ephesians 5:8 NRSV, and *The Message*, verses 8-10.

^{xii} *Gates of Prayer: The New Union Prayerbook* (New York, 1975): 170f. 10.