

Sermon: Lent 4

The Rev. Mike Wernick

March 26, 2017

Year A

1 Samuel 16:1-13

Psalm 23

Ephesians 5:8-14

John 9:1-41

Today is *Laetare* Sunday... if we had them... we'd use rose colored hangings and vestments... because we are supposed to... we are allowed to... have a reprieve from the heaviness of Lent... and in some ways we do... because today's Gospel is in some ways... a kind of comedy of errors... but before I describe that... let's look at our Jewish scripture...

Seven of Jesse's sons pass by Samuel... and the Lord said to Samuel... *Do not look on their appearance... or on the height of their stature... for the Lord does not see as mortals see... they look on the outward appearance... but the Lord looks on the heart...* seven of Jesse's sons pass by... seven is the number of fullness... and Samuel finds God's royal light in none of them... *are ALL of your sons here...* Jesse says... but God goes above fullness... to the one who is of such little account that he is tending animals... and God says... *this one... I can see this one's heart... and it is a heart after my own...* we do not know... who God will call... but God sees into all our hearts... and God can see even in darkness...

In the electromagnetic spectrum... there is more light... than we can see... and there are insects and animals which see... what we cannot... but yet... we are sometimes quick to conclude... that because someone's eyes don't work... that they're also deaf... AND WE SPEAK LOUDER TO THEM... or that maybe they're mentally handicapped... we are sometimes quick to conclude who is worthy of love... or punishment... or reward... or healing...

Exodus 34 says that God keeps steadfast love for the righteous to the thousandth generation... but for the guilty... God visits the iniquity of the parents to the third and

fourth generation... but about 400 years after it was written... Ezekiel wrote... the person who sins shall die... a child shall not suffer for the iniquity of a parent... the righteousness of the righteous shall be his own... and the wickedness of the wicked shall be his own...

My mother's sister is an adopted aunt... you may remember me telling the story about how she was part of the *Kindertransport* ... a rescue effort that took place during the nine months before the outbreak of the WWII... her parents were not born in America... but she was an American citizen... and so when she passed through Germany and France and Belgium and England... she was also able to come to Brooklyn, NY... to live with my mother's family... who were second cousins... her parents saw the anti-Jewish writing on the wall... they saw what was coming... and they wanted to protect their daughter... so they sent her away... with broken hearts... they sent her away... and her father was later taken from the street to a concentration camp where he was murdered... and her mother died by suicide in a sanitarium... overwhelmed by her loss...

In our city... this past week... there were about forty Hispanic parents... who gathered discreetly... quietly... in a church basement... to receive legal counsel... to sign legal papers... so they could decide who would care for their American born children... if they are deported... I can't imagine how a parent would feel... having to make that choice...

There are some who might say these parents brought this on themselves... by being here illegally... there are some who might say my aunt's parents ought not to have returned to Germany... but when asked about finding judgment in disaster... Jesus asked... *Do you think that the Galileans murdered by Pilate... were worse sinners than all the others because they suffered in this way? Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them? Do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? — I tell you, No!*

Jesus assures us that tragedy is not God's punishment for sin... he says we are all equally guilty of sin... and if any deserve punishment... then all deserve punishment... but still... we hold on to this notion... to this belief... that God inflicts someone with the grief of having to choose caregivers... or send their daughter away... or a disability... as a punishment for sin... whether their own... or that of their parents...

And so when the disciples asked Jesus whose sin caused the man's blindness... everyone begins pointing fingers at one another... they turn the man's existence into a theology class about sin... talking about him instead of to him... they articulate an "everything happens for reason" theology... they think this is reasonable... because God is all powerful... all knowing... and all loving... and so people say... to help themselves feel better... *God doesn't give us anything bigger than we can handle...* or... *when God closes a door God opens a window...* and the most insensitive and theologically abhorrent one of all... *God needs little children in heaven too...* and we read tragedies as divine judgment... after all... everything happens for a reason... right...

But Jesus doesn't go there... in effect... in today's Gospel... he says... *that's the wrong question...* Jesus rejects the connection between sin... and disability... and disease... the question Jesus asks is... *in this particular circumstance... in this moment... how can God's power be revealed here... in what ways are we all called to behave in love...* and it forces us to ask... *what are our hearts like... who do we condemn...*

But everyone in the Gospel disbelieves their own eyes... our synod bishop wrote... the neighbors wonder if this can possibly be the same man who sat and begged... so like Congress dealing with a scandal... the synagogue's leaders launch into three hearings before the Pharisees... the now-sighted man is interrogated twice... and his parents once... and they... afraid of being punished at the hands of those who can't see what's right in front of them... perhaps like the Hispanic parents who signed papers last

week... his parents create some distance... he's of age... ask him... don't make me say something that will get me in trouble... we invoke the Fifth Amendment...

And with each interrogation... the Pharisees become more and more confused... and closed to God's revelation... they do their best to label Jesus a sinner... because he works on the Sabbath by making mud... they even question the identity of the man born blind in order to discredit the miracle... but the man born blind comes to sight and faith... in the Son of Humanity... while the religious leaders move deeper and deeper into blindness...

For example... there are occasionally children come out as gay or lesbian... or transgender... whose parents... cannot see the child in front of them... who cannot hear what they say... concerned... as the parents in our Gospel are... of being judged... or ostracized on account of their children... some of these parents see only with their eyes... and not with their hearts... there are occasionally elected leaders who cannot see... or say they cannot see what is going on around them... because they do not want to be held accountable for what others say or do... there are occasionally religious leaders... who do not speak truth to power... because they do not feel credible enough to do so... or because they too fear being put out...

But God says... once you were darkness... but now in the Lord you are light... live as children of light... for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true... take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness... but instead expose them...

So can a homeless woman... with whom we share a meal... teach us anything about ourselves... and help us rise from the dead... can that man who begs for alms... at 28th St. and Kalamazoo... open our eyes to see something that God wants us to see... or hear something God wants us to hear... about the injustices swirling around in some of our social systems... and rise from the dead...

We see the speck in our neighbors' eyes... but not the logs in our own... we are quick to judge the sin in others... but even quicker to excuse our own...

In Matt. 13: we read... *Then the disciples came and asked him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" Jesus answered... The reason I speak to them in parables is that 'seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.' But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear... many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it...*

What we see... is that today's Gospel represents all of humanity... we're all born blind... John invites us to see ourselves in the disciples... in the neighbors... in the Pharisees... and in the man's parents... John invites us to see what's going on with our hearts... the way God saw into David's heart...

I really want to see with my heart... and hear with my heart... and instead of judging... instead of believing that everything happens for some incomprehensible but divinely inspired reason... so I can trick myself into believing that I can control what I can't...

There is value in accountability... but instead of pointing a finger of blame... instead of shifting the focus the way the man's parents did... I just want to ask... *in this circumstance... in this moment... how can God's power be revealed...* I want to be less concerned about how we got here... and more concerned about how to make it right...

And when God sees into my heart... I want to be one who is called to something greater than myself... I believe we all do... that makes today's Good News... God's story... but also our story...

Mike+