

“Uncharted Territory”

Rev. Jayneann McIntosh, Lead Pastor
First United Methodist Church of Wausau
March 22, 2020

John 9 Common English Bible

As Jesus walked along, he saw a man who was blind from birth. Jesus' disciples asked, “Rabbi, who sinned so that he was born blind, this man or his parents?”

Jesus answered, “Neither he nor his parents. This happened so that God's mighty works might be displayed in him. While it's daytime, we must do the works of the One who sent me. Night is coming when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” After he said this, he spit on the ground, made mud with the saliva, and smeared the mud on the man's eyes. Jesus said to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” ... So the man went away and washed. When he returned, he could see.

The man's neighbors ... led the man who had been born blind to the Pharisees. Now Jesus made the mud and smeared it on the man's eyes on a Sabbath day. So Pharisees also asked him how he was able to see.

The man told them, “He put mud on my eyes, I washed, and now I see.”

Some Pharisees said, “This man isn't from God, because he breaks the Sabbath law.” Others said, “How can a sinner do miraculous signs like these?” So they were divided. Some of the Pharisees questioned the man who had been born blind again: “What do you have to say about him, since he healed your eyes?”

He replied, “He's a prophet.” ...

They called a second time for the man who had been born blind and said to him, “Give glory to God. We know this man is a sinner.”

The man answered, “I don't know whether he's a sinner. Here's what I do know: I was blind and now I see. ... This is incredible! You don't know where he is from, yet he healed my eyes! We know that God doesn't listen to sinners. God listens to anyone who is devout and does God's will. No one has ever heard of a healing of the eyes of someone born blind. If this man wasn't from God, he couldn't do this.”

They responded, “You were born completely in sin! How is it that you dare to teach us?” Then they expelled him.

Jesus heard they had expelled the man born blind. Finding him, Jesus said, “Do you believe in the Human One?”

He answered, “Who is he, sir? I want to believe in him.”

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

The man said, “Lord, I believe.”

Yes. Well, any ideas I might have had in February for this 4th Sunday of Lent seem so out-of-place for today. All week, I've asked myself what word of grace can I offer as the number of COVID-19 cases worldwide approach ¼ million (as of Thursday) and cases in Wisconsin are showing up ever-closer to home.

We need a word of hope. We need guidance and encouragement. Our days are full of shadows. Taken aback by the sheer mass of information, by the numbers of people who have fallen ill, we

cannot tell what lays ahead. We don't trust our senses. Perhaps this is part of what it feels like to be blind.

I had been thinking of entitling one of our sermons in May, "A World Turned Upside-Down" talking, maybe, about Matthew 25 – the sheep and the goats, and the ways we live out our faith. This title describes what has been happening in the world in recent months, and in our own communities in the last couple weeks. But I read something the day after the W.H.O. formally named COVID-19 as pandemic. Leo Varadkar, Ireland's prime minister said: "This is uncharted territory."

Uncharted Territory. That's where we are. Think of the old maps you looked at when you were in school. The ones explorers drew. They showed a lot of detail for the places they knew while the rest was empty. Think of the maps we used to use before GPS. What did we use them for? To get where we were going... To see where we'd been... Maybe to notice things on the way that we would have missed otherwise.

What if you turned on your GPS to go someplace new and it showed a vacant space between where you are and where you were headed? Time to get a new GPS, you'd think! But what if that emptiness was uncharted territory. You would be uncomfortable. You might think twice about going out.

We are not used to uncertainty, in our maps or in life. We expect to be able to lay out our calendars with all that we are doing today, plug in our vacations and our business trips, add in when school is in session, when we go to the church and the gym. Without all of this, you may feel like you are "operating blind." Maybe this traditional Lenten scripture that Martie read for us has a word for us this month.

102 years ago, the world faced another pandemic. My daughter reminded me last week that our nation, indeed the world, faced another scourge in the 1980s with the discovery of AIDS. I struggle with the blindness that our nation has cultivated in our short history. Blindness that makes it easier for us to ignore the humanity of those with AIDS or in inner-city prisons, our neighbors in China or south-of-the-border. Yet this seems to be part of the human condition, something that many nations have faced through the centuries.

When our eyes are open, we see that no one chooses to leave a safe, comfortable home to try to breach the wall. No one chooses to be ostracized simply for being who they are. No one courts rejection unless they are in a very low place. When this happens, they need our compassion not our judgment. Who are the blind ones? I suggest that we are, or can be.

If we had met in the sanctuary this morning, you would have witnessed a short skit in which one person spoke of how God fills their days with hope and peace, saying: "All that I am and everything I have are because of God. Even when life is hard, I know God is with me."

When that person finished, another would have begun, "I'm poor. Deserving poor or undeserving, I don't know – it depends who you ask. I don't think about God much. I'm too busy just trying to stay alive. I don't know if God thinks about me much either. Life is hard. There are some people who wouldn't mind if I just disappeared."

Of course, these two represent a religious leader and the man who was born blind. By the end of the skit we would have observed as the once blind man exclaimed, "I can see!" And the religious leader, recognizing their own blindness, said, "Jesus, help me to see, too."

For some of us, it's easier to notice where we have been blind. Others may find it easy to tell where they saw fully. This story calls us to notice both their, and our, sightedness and blindness. Where have you been blind this past week? Where did you see?

When Jesus and his followers first come across the blind man, one of the disciples asks whose fault it is that this person is blind. Jesus responds that it's no one's fault.

No one is to blame – for a drought or a storm, for illness or for health. Some people might suggest otherwise, and sometimes – technically – they are right. What then, you say? To that, Jesus says to a crowd of men holding stones, “Let the one of you who has never, ever done something wrong throw the first stone.”

If they have not already, someone is going to say that this novel coronavirus and the illness that comes from it is God's punishment, whether for closing borders or opening them, because we accept and affirm transgender persons or because we reject them. After all, Biblical writers interpreted events of their time as coming from an angry God. And some people take the Bible quite literally. But God does not work that way!

Here me again, God operates not from a place of judgment but from a place of love. Always. God is with us in this. With us, and with the people in China and Iran and everywhere else. And part of our call as followers of Christ is to practice that same compassion, advocacy, and justice that we find in Christ.

There are times when someone, some agency or nation, truly is responsible for something. But even then our best response – if we are to follow the Spirit's lead – is to recall that there are times when we brushed something under the carpet and hoped no one saw, when we turned a deaf ear to some truth, when we withheld acceptance, when we pretended not to see. I don't know who said it first but an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth leaves us with a world full of toothless, blind people.

There's that word again. Blind. We all have our blindnesses and there is no shame in it. Last week I was blind to the robins that have apparently returned from their winter homes. Andy noticed them and when he and Martie talked about them, and she then spoke of her cat and the chipmunk on either side of the window, we all had a good laugh in what was otherwise a rather grim day.

My point here is community. For safety reasons, we are practicing social distancing. This does not mean we need to isolate ourselves! Humans are made for community. We need interaction. Send someone a card. Write a letter. Send a bunch of emails. Pick up the phone. Skype. Someone out there needs for you to reach out. And remember, even in this uncharted territory, there are robins. There will be daffodils and green trees.

One day, we will find that the worst is behind us. We will gather for coffee or breakfast. We'll go to the gym. We'll come back to church. We will share handshakes and embraces, stories and laughter. Until that time, rest in God's presence. Let her lead you by quiet streams. Let them spread a table before you. Let his rod and staff give you courage. Believe that even now, goodness and mercy surround you. Tell yourself this, each day, each hour, and you will find that even in this moment, you dwell in God's house.

Amen.