

## Fourth Sunday of Lent, Cycle A

Ephesians 5:8-14 and John 9:1-41

As the human race struggles with the COVID-19 pandemic, I find myself frustrated by all the things I do not see. I do not see why this virus is being treated so much more seriously than other viruses, several of which have killed more people this year than COVID-19. I do not see the logic in shutting down America for six months when the Chinese were able to rein in the virus in two. I want to see long term, so that I know whether I should join the scramble for toilet paper, bleach and meat going on at the grocery stores. My neighbors are hosting daily gatherings for teens, but I cannot see if this is worth protesting. The residents in the skilled nursing unit where my father-in-law lives have been confined to their rooms for two months, although there are no cases of the virus in the building. I do not see how he will manage so long without social interaction.

How appropriate that our readings for this Sunday are about seeing! They comfort us with God's ability to see and do and with God's promise of clarity through Jesus, the Light of the World. God will guide us safely through this difficult time. We can sing along to the ancient baptismal hymn quoted in Ephesians, "Awake, O sleeper!/ Arise from the dead/ And Christ will give you light." The story of the Blind Man straightforwardly reassures us that God is on our side. Jesus' compassion dismisses the disciples' casuistic arguments about the reason for the man's blindness. Who cares about guilt when there is someone suffering? Jesus heals the blind man, even though he did not ask for it. He says, "We have to do the works of the one who sent me while it is day." Mic drop by Jesus; big sigh of relief by us.

But the writer of John's gospel beckons us to see so much more. Heck, the story has another thirty-four verses! There we find, for example, baptismal references that lay out the conversion process of a person entering the Christian faith. The man's lifelong blindness parallels our innate propensity to sin. So Jesus baptizes him: note the presence of the light, the anointing (not smearing) and washing in the pool. The pool called "Sent" represents Jesus, who, in the previous two chapters, is called "sent" ten times. (The one sent by God, the one sent into the world, etc.) The blind man progresses from saying nothing to acknowledging in a stunned way that "a man named Jesus" healed him to declaring Jesus a prophet to longer speeches where he defends Jesus and finally worships him as "Lord." Can you see in there your own baptism and conversion?

The story of the Blind Man tells us that God provides us clarity and mercy, which we can accept or reject. Ponder this choice, the author says. At the heart of our story, God offers us a relationship. In a healthy relationship, each person shares themselves freely, as a person to relate to, not as a thing to be used. In a healthy relationship with God, God wants to help us, not because God desires to point out how inferior we are, but because that is who God is. God cannot do anything but love us and be merciful to us.

Some people in this story ask questions about this relationship and then reject the answers. Some get tangled in their own arguments. The blind man's parents, afraid of human rejection, reject God. The strongest "no" is the last, from the Jews who will acknowledge that God spoke to Moses but are unwilling to allow God to act in a person in their own time and place. We too often want to keep God as an object to be studied or a tool to be used when we decide it is needed. Whenever we, like the characters in the story, decide we have nothing to learn, we reject God. Whenever we expect God to follow our plans or to let us know "the answer," we blind ourselves. We choose the darkness of control and selfishness.

The writer of Ephesians encourages us to *peripateite*, that is, to "walk as children of light." *Peripateite* implies a movement forward. As we face the pandemic today, there is much we cannot see. However, our situation is an opportunity to choose a healthier relationship with God. Instead of demanding control, we can walk with God and "do the works of [God] while it is day." The blind man washed in the pool whose name means "Sent," because the baptized are sent to love as Jesus loved. Instead of focusing on our frustration, we can concentrate on patience, mercy and wisdom. We can let God shape us through our suffering and we can do what we can to bring compassion and love to others.

- ❖ What is your darkness or blindness? Ask Jesus to shine some light on it.
- ❖ What can you do to love others in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic?