



## CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

In the name of the loving, liberating, and life-giving God. Amen.

So our gospel today starts out as a kind of typical healing story. When traveling through the streets. Jesus comes across a blind man, puts mud on his eyes, and tells him to go wash it off in a pool of water. And sure enough, he is healed. All of that happens in just the first handful of verses, and yet the story keeps going. And since this is Lent, I will confess that when I first looked up this gospel, it just looked to me like a giant wall of text. And I thought for a hot minute, couldn't we just cut that stuff out and shorten it just a little? And just about that moment, Father Bill was passing by my office and I'm saying these things. And he gave me some really, really good wisdom of the many years of his ministry. Something to the effect of Chris, don't even think about it.

And so I dug in and soon realized that cutting out the rest of that story would really mean missing the whole point. This isn't about a miracle. What makes the story so long and so wonderful is that it's really about the community's response to a miracle. It's not about the healing of a man's blindness. It's about the blindness of an entire community and its refusal to be healed. This larger message is set up for us right at the beginning when the disciples ask who caused this man's blindness, him or his parents?

The question might sound a little superstitious to us today, but in the ancient Jewish tradition, there was this belief that anyone's physical disabilities, paralysis, blindness, really any bad circumstances in your life, like an illness, poverty, disease, they were seen as God's punishment for sin, and that punishment could even taint your family for generations. The sins of the father are visited upon the children, as it says in Numbers and Deuteronomy.

But Jesus, Jesus dismisses the entire premise of the question. Neither, he says. Neither. This is not about sin. God doesn't punish people for their sins, nor does he punish their children. Life happens. Suffering exists. Emotions like love and disappointment and grief are real. Tragedy strikes. Natural disasters occur. People have free will and make terrible choices. It's all part of the human experience. It's all part of the reality of existence. But, Jesus says, they are all opportunities to show the glory of God, to share God's unconditional love, to extend God's endless mercy to a hurting world.

And in that simple move, that reversal, Jesus upends not only their understanding of God but the whole ordering of society, which had grown out

of it. And it's in the ripples of that upending that we see unfold throughout the rest of the story. Did you notice at the beginning, for example, how did the disciples behave toward the blind man? There was no expression of compassion. No offer to help. They seemed to see him merely as an interesting subject for a theological debate, as if he were an exhibit in a museum or the zoo. They never speak to him directly. No one asks him his name. No one introduces themselves and yet they have no problem questioning his character, his morality, that of his family, right in front of him. With no regard to his feelings as if he wasn't even there.

Do we still do that today? Blind people will tell you that it's common even today, that when people speak, they don't speak directly to them. They speak instead to their companion. Again, as if they weren't even there. What about homeless people? Do we avoid making eye contact when we pass them by? Do we fail to offer even the common courtesy of a hello or a good morning as we might with anyone else that we saw as a person? When we serve at soup kitchens and food banks, or when we see anyone who is struggling, do we ever wonder what they might have done that brought this upon them?

In the gospel, Jesus is the only person that sees the blind man as a person. In the eyes of the disciples, his community, even the religious authorities, he is tainted and contaminated, an outcast who exists merely as a public example of what befalls those who don't follow God's rules. Which is why when the man's sight is restored, the townspeople who have seen him his whole life, who have walked past him for years, they don't even recognize him. They don't know how to see him beyond the scarlet letter that they had pinned on him so long ago.

And so once again, they start talking about him right in front of him. Who is he? Is he the blind man? I don't know. Maybe he just looks like him. Once again, they're talking about him without talking to him. Have you had that experience, people talking about you right in front of you, debating your ideas, speculating about your motivations, planning your life as if you weren't even in the room?

We do that to young people all the time, don't we? I remember doing it to my grandmother as she was getting older, and I felt it done to me. And it is frustrating. It makes you feel invisible, which is why my favorite line in this amazing story is when the formerly blind man, seeing all this speculation going on about him and right in front of him, finally bursts out to all of them. I am the man. Hello? Here.

Did you also notice how nobody rejoices when he's healed? Not even the man's parents express the slightest hint of joy or gratitude. Where are the hallelujahs? Where's the attempt to connect with him to try to share in his joy, to understand his experience? What's it like to finally see? Does the sun hurt your eyes? What's the most beautiful thing you have seen so far? No, there's no wonder, no

curiosity about what's going on within him. Just the mechanics, just suspicion and disbelief. He's still just a non-person in their eyes.

Why do you suppose that is? Because I think this is what John is trying to get at. Are they ashamed after dehumanizing and ignoring this man for so long? Is it just too hard to try to see him as a person? Does it mean putting up a mirror to something they don't want to see about themselves? Or is it a threat to their carefully ordered hierarchy? I mean, if this man's blindness isn't a punishment for sin, well, what does that mean for all of us at the top? Are we no longer righteous? Might we be sinners and not even know it? How will we know who has God's approval and who doesn't?

Or is this about a refusal to give up scapegoating? As James Allison, our theologian in residence last year reminded u, human history has a habit of finding common ground not through understanding, not through forgiveness, but by finding a common enemy. Someone that we can blame, so we can feel innocent, someone that we can call the problem so we don't have to think about real solutions. Someone that we can force out so that we can feel in. We do it because a common enemy is a shortcut to community. It brings us a sense of peace by distracting us from the true work of being together. But it's a peace without justice, a peace that is not based on Christ's love, but on the othering of God's children. And so it's a peace that ultimately just breeds more violence and an endless cycle of estrangement, resentment, and revenge.

Is this about our addiction to scapegoating? Is that what is holding us back, or is it that the good news just seems like a lot of work? If God is the God of reconciliation and not retribution, does that mean that we have to show compassion as well? Are we now supposed to welcome those who are different, care for those who are sick, serve those who suffer? Are we supposed to now leave our safe and comfortable homes and actually go to the margins and actually meet the people we've been marginalizing for so long? Get to know their names and to stand with them until the margins are no more?

In the very beginning of John's gospel, he says that Jesus came to bring light to the world, but the world did not accept it. Do you see how this light that Jesus is bringing into the world might be resisted? Do you see how this would upend everything? Do you see how much simpler and easier life is when we can just write people off? When we don't have to welcome the stranger? We don't have to learn to love our enemy?

Do you see though that is all still true today? The religious authorities, they can see where this is heading. And so when the man stands by his story, they too cannot let go of the status quo. They too cannot entertain a new way of seeing one another and seeing God, and so they too cast him out once more, leaving

him invisible to a community that prefers to remain blind to God and to God's love that is in their very midst.

Who are the outcasts of our communities today? Who have we made to feel invisible? Who have we othered and scapegoated? With political and religious dogma, who have we become blind to with rigid and legalistic hurdles to justice and fairness, and our own sympathy? Who have we written off for falling short?

This gospel begins with the disciples asking the age-old question: why is this man suffering? But the answer Jesus gives makes it clear it's the wrong question. It's not why suffering. The question we need to ask is how? How will we respond to it? How will we offer the same healing and mercy and love that God offers us? How will we as His disciples show the light of God's glory in a world that is so invested in its darkness?

This isn't a story about a blind man, nor is it a story about a formerly blind man. It's a story of a seeing man, because of all the characters in the story, only he sees Jesus for who He is. Only he calls Him "Lord." And it's a story about a community who didn't want to see, who didn't want to give up its power, who didn't want to face their unjust ways, who didn't want to challenge their assumptions or let go of their prejudices. They didn't want to imagine a world where we were all in and no one that's ever left out. Will we allow Jesus to open our eyes? Will we also call Him "Lord"?

Amen.