

SERMON

Year A - 4th Sunday in Lent – March 19, 2023

The Rev. Carolyn Bradley, Dcn

Eye has not seen, ear has not heard what God has ready for those who love them;

Spirit of love, come, give us the mind of Jesus, teach us the wisdom of God.

To those who see with eyes of faith, the Lord is ever near,
reflected in the faces of all the poor and lowly of the world.

Marty Haugen, Hymn “Eye has not Seen”

At the time of my mother’s death at age 87, she was considered legally blind. She had developed macular degeneration in her mid-60’s. The progression of this condition slowly robbed her of her central vision and her ability to engage in her 2 main joys in life: reading and shopping. Certainly she loved my Dad, her children and her grandchildren. But she was a voracious reader and truly enjoyed her shopping trips. From her shopping expeditions she returned with treasures and bargains some of which she used almost daily and others which never left the box.

As Mom’s macular degeneration progressed, she was unable to drive. That meant Dad had to take her everywhere...which put a bit of a dent in her shopping. Dad asked ridiculous questions of Mom such as why an item was needed that Mom wanted to buy. When Dad preceded her in death that meant either my brother who lived nearby drove her or neighbors would take her to church, out for breakfast or to MD appointments. When I would visit we would go clothes shopping. But as her vision deteriorated, she did not want to leave the house. She could navigate the house because she could remember where everything was. Going to a

store created great anxiety because she was fearful of bumping into people or things, even though we held her by her elbow and told her what direction we were walking.

But Mom was a fighter. She had been a teacher and was a great advocate for students who needed services that they were not receiving or the quiet, bright student who often went unrecognized. With that drive to “rage against the dying light” as Dylan Thomas phrased it, Mom became involved with an advocacy group for people with vision problems...NCAVI...the North Country Alliance for the Visually Impaired. She became a speaker for the organization, going to schools, civic groups, etc. to educate the public about visual impairments and the use of “white canes”...an aid for people with vision problems. She petitioned the town for a street sign on her block that indicated there was a Blind Person Walking in that area...not that Mom was much of a walker! But it created awareness for others.

Periodically Mom would get mad at God. She was mad that she lost Dad and lived 16 years without him. She got mad that she lost her sight and could no longer read or drive. But she never lost her faith never abandoned her relationship with God. Mom’s relationship with God was transactional...she did things and God was supposed to then do for her. A Quid Pro Quo sort of deal. Mom prayed 5 rosaries daily for my salvation but God never made me heterosexual nor did I return to the RC church. Those situations made Mom mad. But she still tried to get to weekly Mass and communion, fulfilled her pledges to the parish and was on every charity mailing list that seemed to be in existence! Mom’s blindness changed her physical life but not her spiritual life. She remained steadfast in her rigid adherence to Roman Catholic traditions and rituals. It worked for her.

In today's Gospel, we hear the story of Jesus healing the man who was blind from birth. As this selection comes from John, the most mystical of the Gospels, we know to search for more than the obvious. The symbolism of the blind man may stand for many things, awareness of people with disabilities or the importance of creating a caring, supportive community. But the selection from John is paired with the Hebrew scripture from Samuel which focuses our attention on seeing rightly; not just physical sight but spiritual or inward illumination.

In the healing of the blind man, we hear the story of how faith progresses; the struggles between the powers of darkness and light, the struggle between belief and unbelief. We listen as the blind man moves from confusion and uncertainty to an affirmation of faith, "Lord, I believe." The narrative illustrates the conflicts we as believers experience in our faith journeys...antagonism between belief and unbelief, struggles to reconcile what is seen and what is felt, being physically sighted but remaining spiritually blind. The story asks us to consider how belief provides us with a liberating vision.

Reflecting on today's Gospel, Marty Haugen's hymn, "Eye has not seen" kept popping up in my mind. Haugen's words seem to capture the essence of the message for us regarding how faith should change how we see and how we ACT in our world. When we see with "eyes of faith" we can begin the process of trying to attain "the mind of Jesus" and to acquire "the wisdom of God." When we adopt this different way of seeing we are able to acknowledge the people around us and to consider their needs, not just ours.

The question at the beginning of the reading, "Who sinned, this man or his parents?" is pertinent for us today as we consider our own "blindness" to the needs of people around us. While I would hope everyone hearing this sermon rejects the view that suffering is the result of

sin, we often look for physiological or psychological determinants in the individual. We “blame the victim” rather than examine the societal structural issues which cause issues such as poverty, homelessness, etc. and have their origins in fears or prejudices.

We live in an increasingly divided culture defined by book-banning, the altering of Advanced Placement curricula for African American Studies, denying women control over their own bodies, prejudice and increasing violence toward LGBTQ+ people and the subsequent silencing of voices. Yet scripture provides us with a method to navigate these challenging and sometimes fearful times. Scripture tells us that **ALL** people are created in the image and likeness of God and are therefore worthy of being treated with dignity and respect. Our Baptismal Covenant reminds us that we are to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves and to strive for justice and peace, respecting the dignity of every human being,

We truly demonstrate our love for God when we love our neighbors...***all our neighbors.*** It is easy to love people who look, think and act as we do...the right people...but then are we following what Jesus called us to do or acting on our own fears and insecurities? We learn best how to serve others when we listen to and learn from the experiences of the people in our society who are marginalized and oppressed. By ***listening*** we develop empathy and a greater understanding of perspectives different than our own. When we deny ourselves such experiences, we deny the opportunity to love our neighbor, and thus love our God.

Lent is an opportunity to examine whether our communities treat people as “outsiders” or “insiders.” In today’s Gospel, neighbors identified the man who was blind as a beggar—an outsider. Yet he and his parents were Jewish community insiders. When leaders questioned the man about receiving sight, his proclamation about his experience grew bolder until they drove

him from the synagogue. Now an outsider, Jesus found him again. On Friday, we remembered another outsider, St. Patrick. Kidnapped to Ireland, he survived by faith as an enslaved outsider. St. Patrick escaped and became a priest—a church insider. He returned to Ireland and boldly proclaimed God’s love, despite opposition from leaders. St. Patrick and the man Jesus healed experienced God’s love as outsiders and insiders. During these last few weeks of Lent, let’s seek God’s love among people regarded as outsiders. That’s where we will find God.

May we be among those who did not see but now do.

AMEN!