

Lent 4 (A)
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Text: John 9:1-41

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Every day the news reports the number of people in Oregon who have been diagnosed with COVID-19, and the number of people who have died. And not just Oregon—there are numbers for the whole United States, and Spain and Italy and Iran and China. And hidden behind each and every one of the numbers is a person, maybe someone with a family that is worried, or grieving. Each of them is more than just their disease, more than just a sad case, or a cautionary tale. Behind every number is a person with their own life story, with memories and loved ones. I believe that one key to finding our way through this uncertain and anxious time is to resist getting caught up in frantic fear, fear that leads to hoarding and scapegoating, and instead simply attend, with love, to the people around us—people with life stories and memories and loved ones.

Our gospel story for today, about the man born blind, means to challenge how we see the people around us. The disciples didn't think of the man as a person with a life story or memories or loved ones. They seem to have thought of him as a "sad case," or maybe even a cautionary tale. They imagined they had him pigeonholed. They thought they had an explanation for everything. They thought his blindness must be some sort of punishment from God, so the important question was—who's fault was it? "Who sinned, this man or his parents?" They wanted to be able to assign blame. They wanted to define his place in the narrative of their lives. Maybe they supposed it would make them feel better, make the world see a little less chaotic and frightening, if they knew who was responsible for this. Then they could pretend that the world is orderly and predictable, and they could pretend that they would be safe—as long as they didn't do whatever it was that that man or his parents did.

Jesus was completely uninterested in the question of blame. He was interested in the man himself, and in how God's gift of healing could change his life, because healing people's lives and people's relationships is what God is all about. Healing is what reveals God's goodness and glory. So Jesus proceeded to heal the man, to give him sight for the first time in his life. And you'd think everyone would be happy about that. But no, there was a problem. It was the Sabbath, a religious day to refrain from work and to honor God. Now you'd think that the religious authorities would see the healing of this man as truly honoring God, but they discounted it, because it involved work on the Sabbath. And so the story spins out, with the authorities questioning the man, and interrogating his parents, and finally they threw the man out of their faith community, because this healing didn't fit within the narrow boundaries of how they understood God and God's work.

It's sad, but it's also a pretty good picture of how people tend to think and act—not just the religious authorities back then, but now as well: religious people and secular people, conservative people and liberal people, everyone. The easiest thing in the world is to see people in terms of their outward circumstances, as though their lives were defined entirely by being young or old, healthy or sick, gay or straight, black or white, rich or poor, religious or

secular. It's easy to imagine that we can understand people and know everything we need to know about them simply because we've pigeonholed them in this group or that group. And once we've pigeonholed them, then we know how to relate to them, or not.

But Jesus sees the man born blind, and sees all of us as more than our outward conditions. Jesus sees us as beloved children of God, as people with life stories and memories and loved ones, who all belong to God and are precious to God. Jesus sees the tremendous mystery that is each and every one of us—beautiful and broken, with hopes and fears and dreams, abilities and limitations, sometimes with a sense of clarity about life, and sometimes deeply confused and hurt. Jesus knows us, and is at work in our lives to bring healing and wholeness, what the Gospel of John calls abundant life. Abundant life isn't the same thing as a clean bill of health, medically speaking. You can live Christ's abundant life whether you are young or old, rich or poor, even healthy or sick. It's all about trusting how God sees us, and living that way—as people who are loved, and in turn love others; people who are forgiven, and in turn forgive others; people who have experienced God's healing power in our lives, and who in turn seek to be a channel of that healing power to others.

Just as Jesus gave new sight to the blind man, as the risen One, Christ wants to meet us to give us new sight as we hear his word. And I wonder how we might experience Christ's healing work through this time of social distancing. I wonder if we might begin to see some things more clearly—to see that this gift of life is a temporary and precious gift; to see our neighbors as beloved children of God, the ones who are like us and the ones who aren't; and to see ourselves as loved by God and gifted by God to share that love—maybe by making a phone call to someone you know who is isolated, and probably lonely; maybe by writing a letter to connect with someone; maybe by picking up groceries for someone who can't get out. And the more we think about it, the more ways we'll see to attend to our neighbors in love.

Beloved children of God, you are held securely in God's eternal embrace, today and always. You each are seen and known by God as a person with a unique story and unique gifts. You are seen and known and named precious by God who first gave you breath, and who walks with you through every moment of your life on this earth, and even beyond. I invite all of us to anchor ourselves in this deep and holy truth which is our hope and strength.

And as you live out of this deep truth, God gives you to the world to be a sign of the power of compassion and forgiveness, a sign of the power of reconciliation and the power of peace—so that every person can be seen, not just for their outward circumstances, but as a precious child of God, with stories and memories and loved ones. And once you've seen that, you can never go back to seeing yourself or the world in any other way. Thanks be to God. Amen