

Fourth Sunday in Lent, A  
I Samuel 16:1-13  
Ephesians 5:8-14  
John 9:1-41

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Two weeks ago I saw an obituary for Judy Heumann, a well-known disability rights activist. She died recently at age 75 – but before that, she changed the world.

Judy had polio as a baby and used a wheelchair. She made news in 1970 when she fought for her right to work as a teacher, and won. All her life she advocated for people with disabilities, served in two presidential administrations, and helped pass landmark laws including the ADA-- Americans with Disabilities Act. Most of us can't imagine what life was like for people with disabilities before Judy and others got to work.

I learned about Judy through a pretty amazing Netflix documentary our church movie group watched during pandemic. The film is called *Crip Camp: A Disability Revolution*, and it's about Camp Jened in the Catskill Mountains, which in the 1960s and 70s was what they called "a summer camp for the handicapped run by hippies." It was a liberating place for youth of all disabilities, physical and intellectual, and it launched a generation of activists.

Judy Heumann really shines in that film. As a young adult she was a natural leader, clear, focused, inclusive, committed to letting each person's unique voice be heard, including people who had trouble forming their words because of their disability. The whole group would stop and listen while someone slowly spoke and would try their best to understand -- with patience and acceptance and humor. That film celebrated people who were largely invisible before that movement. People who had intentionally been *made* invisible, hidden away at home or in institutions, avoided or shunned, even neglected or abused. Because society didn't *want* to see them or honor their needs.

Before I saw that film, the ADA for me was a building code that dictated how to renovate the church bathrooms. Judy Heumann's story helped me see not just the letter of the law but the people behind it – their individuality and beauty. That documentary actually converted me. It helped me *see* people who were mostly invisible to me before.

*(Judy Heumann, Who Led the Fight for Disability Rights, Dies at 75 (NY Times 3/5/2023); We're 20 Percent of America, and We're Still Invisible (NY Times 7/26/2020); How I get it done: Disability Rights Activist Judy Heumann (thecut.com 9/2020); Crip Camp: A Disability Revolution documentary on Netflix)*

Judy's story came to mind because of our gospel reading and the way Jesus *dignifies* the man who was born blind. It's a remarkable story of liberation on so many levels. Out of all the people in this story, the man born blind ends up being the only one who truly

sees Jesus. Jesus liberates him physically – gives him sight – but more than this, Jesus honors him as a valuable human being and lifts him up as a model disciple. The man born blind becomes the central character in a drama that exposes all kinds of human brokenness and reveals God’s power.

That’s why my friend Craig Satterlee says this is his favorite story in the Bible. Craig has been legally blind since birth, he has less than 10% of normal vision, and he is also a pastor, seminary professor, author and now a bishop. Bishop Craig loves this story because there is no shame. Jesus doesn’t heal the man out of pity – Jesus heals him to reveal God’s power. Jesus considers this man fit to shine God’s light on the world.

*(Insights of a Man Born Blind, Lutheran magazine, Oct 2003)*

Everybody else was busy distancing themselves—from the man’s disability, and from his poverty. Society didn’t know what to do with him, so he was literally marginalized, pushed to the side of the road to shake a cup of coins all day. The disciples treated him like a prop for an object lesson: “Why is this beggar blind? Did he sin, or was it his parents?” Assuming disability was a curse from God. That might seem ridiculous or outdated, except just this week someone told me of a couple whose young child died, and whose “good Christian friends” advised them to search their hearts and try to understand how they must have displeased God, to cause this to happen!

That kind of cruelty is age-old, and it’s rooted in fear. Passing judgment keeps pain at arm’s distance. People try to deny the reality that *everyone* is vulnerable. That *everyone’s* body is fragile, that many of us will become disabled at some point in our lives, especially as we grow older. That it could be *any of us* by that roadside, or in that wheelchair, if things were just a little different. That’s scary at a deep level. And fear can lead to all kinds of exclusion and injustice – and ignoring people’s real needs, legislatively and otherwise.

The religious leaders were afraid – afraid of how Jesus was breaking their sacred rules. Healing on the sabbath! Making a sinner into a disciple! Afraid of their authority being tested, their carefully defended system crumbling. But that purity system was designed to exclude people called “unclean” or “unfit” – people they didn’t know what to do with. Jesus completely rejected this system. He exposed how destructive it was. But it’s still in practice today, just ask our siblings in the queer community.

The man’s parents were afraid too. Afraid the religious leaders would kick them out if they admitted Jesus’ power. It’s heartbreaking, how their fear of that unjust system killed any joy they felt at their son’s amazing good fortune.

Only Jesus wasn't afraid, either of power structures or of frail bodies. Maybe that's why he made a paste out of mud and spit and put it on the man's eyes to heal him. Such a strange and memorable detail. It reminds us that humans were made out of the dust of the earth, in Genesis. We are earth creatures, we are bodies. And God *cares* about bodies, not just spirits. Jesus was born human, born in a body, born into this messy mix of flesh and blood and spit, bones and muscles and nerves and organs that don't always work like they should. Illness happens. Disability happens. My friend Bishop Craig, who lives with blindness, has reflected on this a lot. He believes *not all things happen for a reason*. Some things just happen. And God is still present. God is still good. God is still working to bring a new creation, even through what we experience as weakness.

Christ takes seriously human bodies and human pain on all levels. Because God isn't just saving souls – God is out to redeem and re-create and re-order all human society, set relationships right throughout the whole human family.

Bishop Craig gets it. I was surprised to hear him say that, in all honesty, if God could grant him one miracle, he wouldn't ask for his blindness to be corrected. He says he has a whole lot of other things higher up on his prayer list. Like what? I'm guessing peace instead of war, food for hungry people, that kind of thing. He takes a wider view.

So did Jesus. His miracle was about more than healing one person. It was about healing the whole human family, healing the whole planet.

Jesus declared: "I am the light of the world." Basically he was saying: *You people have been bumbling around in the dark, injuring yourselves and injuring each other, for way too long. It's not just confusing, it is downright dangerous to walk in the dark with no light. People get hurt. I'm here so you can walk in the light. In me, "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness does not overcome it."*

Christ's light *exposes injustice*. That's what happens in this story, right? Christ's light shines into the beggar's life, and it exposes all the fear and prejudice and hatred in that system. It makes plain how fear kills joy. How injustice creates exclusion and creates poverty. How beautiful people sit neglected by roadsides. How societal structures are constructed to serve the powerful. Even religious structures, built to assure insiders that they are holy. A lot of people expect this from their religion even today. A sense of "I'm right and others are wrong" makes some people feel worthwhile, but it becomes a deadly weapon – and it is not what God intends for us. Jesus says "I am the light of the world" – light for *all* people, not just some.

By the end of the story almost everyone is still in the dark, but every time the man is questioned, he gains more understanding, until finally he says, "Lord, I put my faith in

you.” Aha! That’s it. The real miracle is not that the man *sees*, but that he *sees Jesus*. And through this story we *see Jesus* better too.

And we are left with some valuable questions to reflect on as we return to the Lord in humility this Lent.

Jesus is “the light of the world.” What is Christ’s light revealing to us today? What do we see when our eyes are opened, in faith and love and generosity? What patterns or systems do we recognize, that need to be changed?

I wonder what or who Christ will make *more visible* to us. I had never seen the disability community so clearly or lovingly before. I wonder what else our Lord wants us to notice, or notice again, or bring back into our field of attention.

What beloved children of God do we notice sitting by the roadside today? That’s almost too heartbreaking to answer in any big city. But God is pleading with us not to turn away, instead to keep our eyes open, in love and trust. God is calling us to keep on looking and keep on seeing, and become part of collectively *seeing our way ahead*.

Here’s the crazy thing. It’s almost impossible to identify our own blind spots-- by definition! We can’t very easily identify what we cannot see. But God wants to expose our blind spots, the gaps in our attention, so that we can see more things in the light of Christ’s love and acceptance, justice and truth, forgiveness and compassion. It’s a journey. We help one another to see.

I wonder what it will mean for us to invite Christ’s light to shine into darkened places, and let God’s light shine through us.

Today baby Zachary is being baptized, and he will be presented with a candle that’s lighted from the Easter candle. He’ll receive a small flame of Christ’s resurrection light, and we pray that as Zachary grows he will indeed be a light to others, and shine the light of a wisdom far beyond his own.

The words from Matthew will be said—say them with me? Words for all of us: *“Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.”*

Christ’s light shines upon us, and through us. Thanks be to God. Amen.