

**The Rev. Dr. Mary Barber**

**3.15.26 - Lent 4**

A man is healed by Jesus. But instead of rejoicing, there is confusion, accusation, chaos, coming from different groups of onlookers.

Today's Gospel starts right out with a controversy. The disciples see the man born blind and ask, Who sinned, this man or his parents? Jesus says the man's blindness is not about sin at all, rather "He was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him."

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This is a mystifying statement by Jesus. It's hard to know what he means.

But Jesus had made something else quite clear. "Neither this man nor his parents sinned." Blindness is not about sin, Jesus says. Inherent in the disciples' question is the bias of ableism, the idea that whole, able bodies are better than disabled bodies, that if someone is born blind, something must have gone wrong.

Jesus tells the disciples, blindness is not about sin. But then, Jesus does something a little problematic himself. He just reaches out and puts mud on the blind man's eyes.

In other Gospel stories, Jesus asks the question, What do you want me to do for you? He gets consent. After all, maybe the blind man does not want to be healed of his condition. Maybe he doesn't want to be touched and prayed over. I really hope Jesus asked permission of the man, and this part of the story was just edited out, because rubbing mud on someone's eyes without any warning seems shocking and yucky.

At least the man gets to actively participate in his healing. He goes and washes the mud off, and can see for the first time in his life.

You would think that the man's life would be better after that, but that does not seem to happen.

Instead, the formerly blind man just meets with all kinds of disruption and chaos from people around him. People talk about him while he's right there -- "Isn't this the guy who used to beg?" "No, it's

just someone who looks like him.” And he’s like, Hello, I’m right here, and yes, I am the man.

People ask his parents about him, even though he’s an adult.

And in a final gaslighting move, when the man speaks and gives some good insights into what has happened to him and what this means about Jesus, they just dismiss the whole thing. “You were born entirely in sins, and you are trying to teach us?”

They can’t accept the formerly blind man as anything other than his former disability. They refuse to fully recognize him.

This kind of thing happens to disabled people all the time. Wheelchair users experience people talking to their able-bodied friend standing next to them, and not even looking at them, as if they are not just unable to walk, but also unable to hear or speak for themselves.

We can look at a person’s disability and think we are looking at who they are, global and unchanging. When the man born blind suddenly looked different, it may have shocked and angered his neighbors. For them, the world suddenly seemed not right.

These kinds of attitudes have sometimes been called spiritual or metaphorical blindness. But this is really unfair to blind people, who cannot see because of a physical condition. What the onlookers in this story are doing is not due to a condition outside of their control.

They are refusing to see and listen to the man, the man who is right there with them. They are refusing to change their own perceptions, refusing to examine the evidence before them.

They are not blind but willfully ignorant. They don’t perceive, because it is too uncomfortable. Jesus seems to call this behavior out. He says to the crowd of naysayers, “If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.”

In other words, Look people, it would be one thing if you couldn’t see. Then I could understand your inability to see this man before you. You are sinning by refusing to recognize what you are fully able to see.

Jesus starts out at the beginning of this Gospel saying that blindness is not about sin. At the end of

the story he adds something. Blindness is not sin, but refusing to see something when you are not blind is most definitely sin.

We have been witnessing behavior like this in our own city, with historical placards taken down because they contain difficult parts of our past. We have witnessed it in our news this week, with some of our leaders refusing to acknowledge the evidence that our missiles had destroyed a school in Iran and killed children.

Willful ignorance. It is easy to see when it is someone else. But of course we all do this every day, through discomfort when we pretend not to see and hear the person in the street asking for money, through distraction when we miss the miracle of nature all around us.

Now, I'm not certain what Jesus meant when he said that the man was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. He may have meant that the man was born blind so that Jesus himself could perform a miracle and give him sight.

But he may have meant some other things too.

What might disabled people have to reveal about God's works? What might those revelations be? Maybe if we could listen to and learn from the blind men around us, we could be opened to the gifts of disability.

Gifts like the knowledge that we are all created in God's image, in all our diversity of size and color and gender and ability and disability.

Like the realization that we all have limits, we all need rest sometimes, and we need to stop judging each other and ourselves by unrealistic expectations of perfection and productivity.

Like the understanding that none of us is fully independent. We are interdependent -- we all need each other to survive.

We are all broken in some way. And we are all whole, perfect and holy, just as we are.

St Martin's, as we continue in this Lenten season, let us pray to be freed from our sins of willful ignorance. Let us pray to recognize each other and ourselves more fully, with all our gifts and limitations. And let us pray to receive those revelations, to let our minds be changed, even when it is

painful. When we do that, we will be opening ourselves to see God more fully. When we do that, we will be closer to becoming, really becoming, the body of Christ. Amen.