

Sunday March 26th, 2017

Lent IV

PRAYER: Giver of light, we come here today seeking the way out of darkness. O Healer of the blind, let us feel the touch of your clay upon our eyes. Then we, too, shall bathe in Siloam's water. We shall wash and return seeing, our sight restored. Your light shall burn within us, O God, and our neighbours shall behold the light of the world. Amen.

CALL TO CONFESSION: Holy ground and holy places are not hidden on high mountains or in distant countries. Holy ground lies beneath our feet. In our brokenness we fail to realize the sacredness of familiar places and people. Let us confess our sin.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION: God of Moses, you call us as you called the faithful of ancient times-mysteriously shedding light in the midst of uneventful days. Through a shrub alight with divine fire, you reveal that our common days are steeped in holiness and mystery. We confess that we fail to recognize that all ground is holy ground, or that our routine lives are encompassed by splendor, or that this day is the time when you call us to do your work. Forgive us, God. Free us to see the blessing of your presence, and give us the strength to work as you call us. Amen.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE: God extends the gracious promise of rest to us: "Come to me, all who are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Accept the precious gift of Christ's forgiveness and peace. Amen.

STEWARDSHIP: The apostle Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 9:6, "He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully." May we offer our tithes and offering now in a bountiful way so we may by God's grace reap a bountiful harvest for his glory.

PASTORAL PRAYER: Dear God, we come before you today, a fearful and confused people. Many shadows haunt this world and cast their darkness upon us and those we love. Anxiety crashes into our hearts as we hear of nation lifting up swords against nation. Our hopes are crushed when we hear of governments that talk of pursuing peace at powerful summits, but at the same time continue to develop weapons. We hear of articulate people extolling the virtues of tolerance, but soon they point to differences between people as an excuse for exclusion and oppression. O God, if we had to depend on ourselves for strength, we would be left with only despair for the future. If we had to rely on the light within us for illumination, we would have to reconcile ourselves to perpetual darkness. But thanks be to you, O God, for in you we can embrace a future with hope. You have enlightened us with your light, given not only for us but for all people who inhabit the earth. We thank you for granting us deliverance from our fear and clarity for our confusion.

At our baptism we took a vow to walk your way. We promised to follow you in our quest for the truth and to reflect your light. At that time we were so confident of your love for us that we never doubted we would remain loyal to you. But our allegiance to you has wavered. We have strayed from your way to pursue more exotic paths. We have neglected your truth to chase the less demanding wisdom of the world. We have shunned the light to reap the rewards of dealers of darkness. But we have not gotten off scot-free.

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We have sown seeds of fruitless efforts, and now we are reaping empty promises and dashed hopes. The exotic paths that offered endless variety, have only served to aggravate our insecurity and anxiety. The truths of the world's wisdom have kept us preoccupied, and we are left disappointed with fruit of our labours. We have pursued earth's rewards, only to discover that they have corrupted us before moth and rust could corrupt them.

Yet we still come to you, dear God, in full confidence that you will greet us not only as our judge but as our friend. So we ask you for wisdom greater than our wisdom, for vision greater than our vision and strength beyond our strength. Befriend us anew today, that our enemies may no longer have dominion over us; and that we, by our style of life and integrity of witness, may win friends for you and the gospel.

Help us dear Lord not to be blind to those around us who need your grace. Grant us hearts large enough to embrace our sisters and brothers who face uncertain days ahead because of failing health.

Call us now, O God, to yourself as we meditate on your word and as we gather around your table. Help us to set aside those things that alienate us from you and from each other. As we break open your word and break the bread, break we pray our hard hearts and call us to a life of imitating Jesus. This we pray in his precious name. Amen.

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John 9:1-41

“Are You Blind?”

A few years ago in the state of California, an incident occurred involving an elderly woman who had been shopping at the local grocery store. When she was returning to her car in the parking lot, she noticed four men she did not recognize getting into the car. The woman immediately dropped her shopping bags, reached into her purse, and pulled out a small hand gun that she carried for protection.

She ran to the front of the car, aimed the pistol at the men, and began screaming at them at the top of her lungs. She ordered them out of the car and warned that if they didn't, she would blow their brains out. “I know how to use this gun, and don't think I won't!” she screamed. The four men didn't hesitate. They threw open the car doors, scrambled out, and started running away as fast as they could.

The woman was trembling from her experience, but kept her composure. When she was certain the men were gone, she put the gun back in her purse, picked up her bags, and loaded them in the back seat of the car. She then climbed into the driver's seat and decided to go immediately to the police station and report the incident. But there was a small problem. Her key wouldn't fit the ignition of the car.

A quick glance around the interior of the car confirmed, what you already suspect, she was in the wrong car! Her vehicle was parked four spaces away in the same aisle of the parking lot. She quickly loaded her bags into her own car and drove to the police station to confess what she had done. When she told her story to the sergeant, he couldn't control his laughter. He pointed to the other end of the counter where four, very shaken men were reporting a carjacking by a mad, elderly white woman.

By the way, the woman apologized and no charges were filed. It just goes to show you that things are not always as they first appear. I am sure that all of us on some occasion have jumped to a conclusion, only to find out later we were badly mistaken. You may not have pulled out a gun, but you may have hurt someone with unkind words or gestures. Perhaps you spread a rumour that was not true, or failed to include someone in your circle of friends; all because we made a negative judgment.

Like the woman in the parking lot, many of us have a tendency to assume the worst about people. Our attitude is, “we don't think; we just ‘know’ that we are right and they are wrong.” In John 9 Jesus is making his way out of the temple. He had just completed a very nasty exchange with the religious leaders in which he was accused in one encounter of being demon possessed, a Samaritan, being too young, and to top it all of he was even threatened by being stoned to death.

It was a frightening encounter and the venom spit at Jesus was truly hateful. To avoid being stoned, as it was not yet time for his death, Jesus makes his way out of the temple courtyard, followed immediately some of his disciples. I should point out that there is some debate as to whether this is the twelve disciples or some others who followed Jesus.

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Nevertheless, as they are walking along, Jesus stops and begins to focus on a man who was blind; blind from birth. This description of the man was meant to indicate to us that he had some sort of birth defect that left him blind. This is a man who had never seen anything, and because of his blindness, he was relegated to the only option he had in his society to support himself; begging on the street, or living off the charity of others.

The result of this economic situation was that he lived in poverty, and likely lived on the streets. The disciples notice Jesus' interest in the man and ask a question. A question asked out of judgment. "Why was this man born blind? Was it the result of his own sins or those of his parents?" In other words, surely someone did something wrong to cause this man's affliction? This approach to suffering is likely born out of the Ten Commandments as recorded in Exodus 20 verse 5 and 6.

There we read these words, *"I do not leave unpunished the sins of those who hate me, but I punish the children for the sins of their parents to the third and fourth generations. But I lavish my love on those who love me and obey my commands, even for a thousand generations."* Some of the authoritative rabbis held that not only could the sins of the parents leave its mark on an infant, but also the infant could sin in the mother's womb.

The disciples are not being necessarily mean, but are simply expressing the common theology of the day. If something bad happens to you, you must have offended God somehow. Genetic defects in infants caused the Jewish scholars great difficulty, thus they blamed parents for their children's situation or in the case of some parents the blame was somehow shifted to the child; although how a fetus could sin is a mystery to me.

On the other side of the coin, if you are living a blessed life, you must have pleased God somehow. It was the commonly held belief that good and bad things were a direct consequence of a reward and punishment transaction with God. So, when the disciples looked at this man born blind, they judged him and his parents as being responsible for his situation. Now, I must confess that I was tempted to think that this opinion the disciples held was no longer employed in our modern society.

That is until I ran head long into a presentation at Mission Expo TO8 held in 2008 by Rick Tobias of Young Street Mission, Neal Hetherington of Habitat for Humanity, and Tim Huff of Light Patrol. Among so many wonderful insights presented by this panel, was the eye opening conviction that we still judge people in poverty, by believing they are responsible for their own situation.

Tim Huff, who works with street youth, was talking about his experience of sitting with the street kids who sat on Bay Street panhandling. There was one young man there who always kept one hand in his pocket and with his other hand begged for spare change. In the time Tim Huff was there, this young man had been spat upon, kicked by men in business suits, and belittled for not finding a job.

Tim reported that these well to do folks, with every opportunity in life, looked at these young people as lazy, worthless, and responsible for their own situations.

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I too, was convicted of the fact that when I see such marginalized folks, I often make similar assessments. I also suspect that most of us do the same. Tim watched this young man with his hand in his pocket endure abuse from rich strangers, just so he could get enough money for a sandwich and coffee. It is a scene played out many times and in many places in every city and town.

Tim then went on with his story and reported that the young man finally took his hand out of his pocket, and to Tim's surprise the young man was missing all four of his fingers. It seems that this young man's father, in a drunken rage, had chopped his fingers off. Tim makes the point that most of us would have had our impression of that young man changed by that one small piece of information. The point being that the more we know about someone, the more we see people as Christ sees them.

If I were to ask you this morning to define justice, what would you say? Rick Tobias pointed out that most people would answer with the dictionary definition which reads, "Behaviour of one's self, or another, which is strictly in accord with currently acceptable ethical law or decreed by legal authority." Justice defined like this is the basis of many television shows like "Law and Order". The bad guys get their day in court.

Justice defined like this, is the way the Pharisees and Disciples viewed the situation of the man born blind. His condition was the just conclusion of his or his parent's sinful behaviour. Justice defined this way looks at someone who is in poverty, or homeless, and decides that they got what they deserved.

Jesus however, reminds us that justice has a second definition. Most of us don't know that. The dictionary also states that justice is "rectitude of the soul enlivened by grace." Rephrased we would say that justice is moral or ethical behavior governed by grace. When Jesus looked at the man born blind, God's view of justice shone brightly on him. People who are governed by grace see the beauty and worth of all people.

The Psalmist said we are "fearfully and wonderfully made". Not just the well-heeled, the well-educated, the well-connected; but all of humanity. Tim Huff made the point that the reason we need compassionate ministries like food banks, our own First Serving etc. is because there is no justice. If we lived in a truly just society, and I mean a society infused with grace; the man born blind, or the young man with his fingers chopped off, wouldn't be relegated to begging on the street suffering abuse from strangers.

Mother Theresa once said, "Let no one come to you without leaving happier and better." That is justice. The justice God seeks. So when Jesus looks at the man born blind what was the just thing to do? It was of course to heal him. Jesus looked beyond the surface and knew the man's story. He saw the worth and beauty of this blind beggar. Jesus sought to bring him to wholeness; first by healing him and then by redeeming him.

Now contrast Jesus' treatment of the man with that of those who knew him to be formerly blind: namely his neighbours, his parents and the Pharisees. Nobody, but the man himself, wanted to celebrate this great thing.

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Instead, they tried to dismiss what happened as being a trick, or perhaps an incident of mistaken identity. His own parents who appear to have abandoned him to his fate, and fearful of reprisals from the religious authorities didn't even say one word of gladness over what happened. I wonder if this is the knife that cut the deepest in this whole affair. Instead, the parents who must have wondered for years what sin they committed or the fetus committed to cause the blindness now distanced themselves from him. "He is old enough to speak for himself. Ask him."

Rick Tobias makes they point that we become what we celebrate. If we celebrate grace, joy, hope or dignity: these qualities will be incorporated into our lives. What we believe is precious; we will invest our lives in? For example: our children our precious to us, so we invest our resources into their care and advancement. The poor and marginalized are precious in God's sight and therefore they need to be precious in our sight as well.

I find it interesting that the man born blind is never named; not by Jesus, the Pharisees or even his parents. In fact, his only identification is his affliction, "the man born blind". Perhaps John wanted his name hidden so that he could represent all people in his situation but maybe the lack of a real name is deliberate to show how justice had failed this man.

With no name, he remains a person without importance in the world's eyes. Furthermore, as we read this story, we see that the Pharisees did not know who he was. The man born blind was a stranger to them. The very people who should have known from the scriptures that God's justice is one of grace, and that the poor are precious in his sight, have never met the one who should have received their attention.

Instead of grace, the man born blind receives nothing by harsh words, relentless questioning, and in the end is called a sinner and tossed out of his local synagogue.

The religious leaders would rather condemn him and excommunicate him, than embrace him, and celebrate the grace expressed to him. John is clearly making a connection between physical blindness and spiritual blindness. The ones who were truly blind were those who failed, or outright refused, to see the truth; the truth that God's kingdom is expressed in grace and the truth that we wittingly or unwittingly contribute to the oppression of others.

By ignoring the man born blind, by threatening him and his family, by failing to celebrate grace and by excommunicating him from his faith community the community was oppressing him. Rick Tobias asked us a question at that Mission Fest that has really stuck with me. He asked how we may be unwittingly oppressing others. Actually he went on to say that we all oppress others.

He gave examples of how the cheap food and cheap clothing we enjoy is often prepared by people living in extreme poverty. Retailers pressure suppliers to constantly lower prices, which mean poorer wages and bad working conditions.

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Economic poverty is the result of an unjust society, a society in which grace is absent. So the question needs to be asked in light of John 9; just how do we respond to our own blindness.

Are we prepared to become people motivated by grace or shall we remain tied to the first definition of justice, which is all about laws and regulations. It is a good thing God didn't act towards us with only the first definition of justice. If he had, we would all be in big trouble. Under the first definition of justice, none of us is guiltless. The apostle Paul writes that we have all "sinned and fallen short of the glory of God". Then he writes that the "wages of sin is death."

In the matter of God verses humanity, we are guilty and sentenced to death. It is the just response by a just God. However, as Jesus demonstrated throughout his entire life and continues to demonstrate even today, God chooses to apply the second aspect of justice in his dealings with us. Paul writes, "While were yet sinners, Christ died for us." God in Christ shows his heart is turned not to condemn the world as the Pharisees thought but to save the world.

Is it not time for us to apply that same kind of heart to those we encounter who need the justice of grace.