

21/22 March, 2020

Lent 4A | Coronatide

St. Andrew's Church, Rapid City

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L+J

In the Name of the One who has the words of everlasting life. Amen.

When I saw the Gospel lesson appointed for this weekend, I thought to myself, "Oh brother."

I can't tell you the number of times I have heard or read pretty awful homilies about this Gospel passage. I think I even preached one in my homiletics class in seminary!

Because there is so much going on in this passage—a man born blind, Jesus healing the blindness, questions over sin and causality, Jesus upsetting the Temple authorities, the true meaning of the sabbath—that it makes for a difficult text to read, hear, and preach on in the best of times, let alone during the midst of a pandemic when nearly everything about our lives is in flux. And yet, it is the Gospel the lectionary gives to us and, I believe, the Gospel that we need to hear right here and right now in the midst of pandemic and change.

The story the Gospel offers us is pretty simple: a man who has been blind from birth is healed by Jesus on the Sabbath (using mud, by the way, which is made from spit and dirt). That healing prompts his disciples to ask whether the man's sin or his parents' sins caused the blindness and offends the Temple leaders who accuse Jesus of violating God commandments for healing on the sabbath.

See what I mean? That's an awful lot happening. And it's only scratching the surface. We could dwell, you and I, in many different places in the text. Why do the disciples jump immediately to asking about sin? How might this man's life or his parents' lives have been different if they hadn't spent so much time blaming themselves? Is this man really born blind so that God's works might be revealed? And does God do this to other people with disabilities? And why do the Temple authorities care so much about breaking the sabbath when they've clearly encountered a miracle?

Lots of directions. Each of which would give us plenty to think and pray and preach and discuss about. And, during this week when many of you will be stuck at home with only so many books on the shelf and so many seasons of your favorite show on Netflix, perhaps you'll take some time to reflect on one or more of these directions and call up somebody in your small group and have a discussion with them?

The direction, I want to go, however, is the mud.

I've not paid much attention to the mud in this passage before. It's easy to skip over the mud and go right to the cause of the mud—the healing of the blind man—or the one who uses the mud—Jesus—or the ramifications of the mud—breaking the sabbath.

But, my friends, I think the mud has a lot to teach us, especially right now in our current context.

The text tells us in verse six that Jesus spit on the ground, made mud with his saliva and the dust of the ground, and then spread that mud across the man's eyes. Healing comes to the man in verse seven after the man washes the mud off in the pool at Siloam.

In a sermon on this passage from John, St. Augustine—the fourth century bishop of Hippo in northern Africa—says that the man who was healed of his blindness is an archetype of all humanity. When we read and hear this story about the man healed of blindness, St. Augustine encourages us to think about this as a story that happened, yes, but also as something with deeper meaning and applicable to the whole human family.

With that lens on, we hear a story about humanity being healed of an inexplicable ailment through three things which are absolutely ordinary and insignificant: dust, spit, and well water.

The miracle—sight where there was previously no sight—comes about through something as insignificant as mud and water. The story we hear in the Gospel—both the literal meaning and St. Augustine’s more metaphorical meaning—is about restoration through insignificant and creative means. This miracle mirrors creation. New life is brought about through dust. Humanity is created out of the dust. And, at the end, returns to the dust. This is the simple truth we proclaimed on Ash Wednesday as the cross was drawn in dust on our foreheads.

We are in need of restoration, aren’t we? Right here and right now. Our world is plagued with confusion and anxiety and unease. People are dying in droves all across the world. Our lives are changed, most often not for the better. We are—or should be!—practicing social isolation. Grocery stores are running out of food. People are losing their jobs. Physicians and nurses and other medical professionals are forced to isolate from their families in order to be available to the public. Priests and deacons and other ministers are prohibited from offering prayers for the sick and dying in person.

It is a rough time all around. A time surely in need of restoration.

The Catechism at the back of the prayer book tells us that the mission of the Church is to restore all people to God and one another through Jesus Christ.

As I said in my letter to the congregation this week, the work and mission of the Church is not, and cannot ever be, cancelled. We have suspended in-person services and shifted most of our operations online and by telephone, but the work of God, which the Church is privileged to carry out, can never be cancelled. We cannot ever stop working towards restoration. And Jesus shows us in today's Gospel that this work of restoration sometimes has to look differently than it usually does. Restoration in our time, and apparently in Jesus's, needed to fit outside the boxes of pre-conceived healing. Jesus is teaching us that restoration in our time must happen through seemingly insignificant and unexpected means.

And, as with the Temple authorities in the Gospel, some people might not like the ways that we go about bringing restoration between God and humanity and humanity and humanity. We have standards and norms, both in the church and in our personal lives. And these standards and norms are being tested and stretched like they've never been before.

And so my invitation to all of us is to think about how we as individuals and as a church are being called to carry out God's mission—the restoration of all people to God and one another—right here and right now? How are we at St. Andrew's and in the Diocese of South Dakota and in the Episcopal Church and in the whole Christian Church being called to work creatively and imaginatively toward restoration? How are we as individuals and as families—most of us being confined to the four walls of our homes—being called to join God's mission of restoration?

I don't have the answers, my friends. But we do. Everything we need to join God in God's mission of restoration and wholeness and healing—of individuals and the whole world—is right here: in this church building, yes, but also wherever you are joining us. We are all that we need. God has equipped God's Church and blessed God's Church to go about this world. We have been given Word and Sacraments. We have been invited into a relationship with God. We have been strengthened by the Holy Spirit.

We have everything that we need to bring about restoration and wholeness, to heal a broken and confused and hurting humanity. We have only to recognize this work in the insignificant and unexpected and creative parts of our lives. Amen.