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Church of St. Thomas More, NYC March 22, 2020
Lent 4th Sunday of Year John 9:1-41

In today's Gospel Jesus appears to be going out of His way to pick a fight with the self-righteous Pharisees. Because He heals the blind man on the Sabbath, in the eyes of the Pharisees Jesus is breaking the Sabbath by working. Jesus could easily have waited just a few hours until the Sabbath was over to perform this healing—the blind man wasn't going any place. And He didn't have to make this clay paste—again work. He could have just cured the blind man by simply speaking to him. But Jesus wanted to show that the Pharisees' rigidity blinded them from acknowledging the evident good work that He is performing. The Pharisees presumed to have God, religion, life all figured out, so that everything has to fit into the religious "grid" they have inherited. Their attitude seems to be "don't confuse us with the facts." They are blind to the facts and why--because if they acknowledged the facts of the situation, in this case the cure of the blind man, evidently a good thing, then they will have to change their fixed attitudes about God, about religion, about life. This, the Pharisees are not willing to do. Consequently they are the ones who are really blind.

In St. John's Gospel there is always more going on than appears on the surface, so what is recounted in today's passage is more than just a cure of a blind man. It is a reflection on the whole human condition, on how life works. At this point we are invited to insert ourselves into the story. In many of the conversations that Jesus has with individuals in St. John's Gospel--as with the woman at the well last week--that individual is unnamed, because there we are to imagine that Jesus is speaking directly to us. In this case Jesus desires to heal our blindness—not physical blindness, but moral or spiritual blindness. The story begins by saying the man was "blind from birth"—and, in a sense, we are all blind from birth. How so? We are born into a world of rivalry and competition wherein we are constantly looking out to preserve our own self-interest, where we find our security, our self-worth, by identifying with certain groups. Then we go on to justify our actions by judging others who are outside those groups, by assigning blame, by finding scapegoats to mask our own moral failure.

Jesus comes as the One who was sent by the Father, sent by the one who created us and our world, to remind us we were not made to live in a world of "us—against them," of mutual antagonism and rivalry. We were made to live as brothers and sisters, as children of the God who is Creator, Father and Provider. So, Jesus comes as light into a world of moral darkness to provide sight, vision, the ability to see things as God made them—as they truly are—not in the distorted way that we human beings have twisted them in order to preserve our own vested interests. He provides

sight for those who want to see. For those who don't want to see, there is no cure for their blindness.

That essentially, is what Christian faith is all about—to see the world through the eyes of Jesus. We often think that the opposite of faith is doubt. But, in St. John's Gospel the opposite of faith is not doubt, but blindness, and in particular a willful blindness. There is nothing wrong with being mistaken, confused or not understanding something. But the certainty that says I must be right and condemns those who do not agree or conform to my sense of what is right--that is the self-righteousness of the Pharisees, that is moral blindness, that is something for which they, for which we, are responsible.

Today's Gospel is full of people passing judgment, of assigning blame. It begins with disciples asking Jesus, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" And Jesus answers, "Neither." Jesus shows compassion, while His disciples look for someone at whom they can point a finger. Later on the Pharisees ridicule the blind man; in their view he is incapable of teaching them anything. They have all the answers; they know how God works, and for them God could not be working in this instance. Because they are so sure that this is "God's day off," they can't see God at work in Jesus. And finally the Pharisees condemn Jesus as a sinner because He "works" on the Sabbath. Because Jesus does not fit into their neat categories, He is written off as some kind of fraud. But Jesus neither judges nor condemns anyone. It is in the manner that individuals react to Jesus—whether they accept or reject the good work He is doing—in their response to Jesus, they are judged, they judge themselves, their true colors are revealed, their hearts are laid bare. So, the Pharisees remain in their willful, moral blindness, though they think they are the ones who see things correctly. While it is the man born blind who not only acquires physical sight, but also goes on to recognize Jesus as the One whom God has sent.

But now is where the rubber hits the road. It would be nice to presume that we have gone beyond Moses to accept the message of Jesus, and therefore we could not possibly be like the Pharisees, that we do not share their blindness, that by believing in Jesus, we have seen the light. (Would that that were true.) I said in the beginning that the basic attitude of the Pharisees is, "Don't confuse us with the facts;" we have everything figured out already; we know what's what. So we don't have to change our attitudes about individuals or groups who don't conform to our assessment of the facts.

Let me now give just a few assessments of certain groups in the world that are

held by those who would presume to judge them—that the poor are poor because they are lazy, or lack initiative, or lack self-discipline—it's their own fault; that the homeless are homeless because they want to be homeless—they prefer to live that way; that sexual orientation is a matter of choice, a preference—not a matter of how one is made, how one is created by God; and that Islam is essentially a religion of violence, unlike Christianity which is a religion of peace, despite the Crusades, pogroms and apartheid. The point of today's Gospel is that we all have our blind spots. What Jesus offers is the light to see through our prejudices, our fears, our resentments, our hostilities to be able to see life, the world, human beings as God has made them--that we are all in this together, and so we are to live together as children of the God who created us.

The Gospel passage ends with words that are both enigmatic and revelatory. Jesus says to the Pharisees, "If you were blind, you would have no sin, but now you are saying 'We see,' so your sin remains." He means any attempt to blame someone for the misfortune of being physically blind is baseless, but theirs (the Pharisees) is a spiritual blindness for which they are indeed culpable. They claim to "see," to teach correctly how the law of Moses is to be understood and practiced, but they have distorted it for their own ends. So severe is their "blindness" that they are incapable of recognizing, of "seeing" the evidently good work Jesus is performing on healing the blind man, even if it is the Sabbath. Here is an instance of the adage with which we are no doubt familiar, "there are none so blind as those who will not see." Let us pray that we be able to see the world through the eyes of Jesus and judge situations in our society by God's standards of mercy and compassion, and not by the standards of self-interest and exclusion.