I ONCE WAS BLIND... NOW I SEE...

I was really surprised at how quickly this week went by. From the time we celebrated Eucharist as a community last Saturday evening until this morning – a Sunday without Eucharist, probably not the last -- dozens of daily emails and phone calls, checking in with people, receiving lots of support, watching too much news and doing a lot of reading, praying for all of you and everyone afflicted by this pandemic -- all these things helped the time to pass with less of a feeling of emptiness and boredom. Knowing that all of you were having to deal with the same frustration and anxiety gave me a comforting sense of solidarity.

On Thursday when the weather warmed up and the sun was brighter, I went out in the back yard and finally planted the flats of flowers I had purchased a couple weeks ago at Costco and Home Depot.

It felt gloriously renewing to dig in the dirt and plant the little seedlings of blue and white alyssum and rock cress, to find a shady spot for the potted impatience and full sun for the kalanchoe and succulents, to pot the beautiful but delicate purple creeping myrtle in the hope that its large blossoms will happily increase as it climbs up the trellis. [Now if I can only convince the two dozen local turkeys to shelter in place somewhere other than my back yard, it will feel like spring has sprung, even during this dark and dismal time we’re going through.]

Nature has its own way of renewing itself and giving testimony to the enduring power of life. The poets say it so well, like Gerard Manley Hopkins who penned: Nature is never spent; There lives the dearest freshness deep down things; or like Elizabeth Barrett Browning who wrote: Earth’s crammed with heaven, And every common bush afire with God, But only he who sees takes off his shoes.

This world of ours has endured many tragedies over its 4.5 billion-year history. We are learning once again that nature is out of our control. It produces the beauty of Mount Diablo that delights us every day, as well as threatening wildfires that terrify us with winds that carry burning embers for miles in minutes. And something that we are all becoming too familiar with -- a small infectious agent that replicates only inside the living cells of an organism -- the Coronavirus. Even as scientists work for a cure, even as we do what we can by isolating ourselves to reduce the spreading curve of the virus, as the children of God, we stand humbly before our Creator and proclaim with Psalm 89: You, O God, own the cosmos -- you made everything in it, everything from atom to archangel.
In today’s gospel Jesus’ action seems strange to us. To fight what nature has done to an innocent man born blind, Jesus mixes his own saliva -- part of his own nature -- with dirt, part of creation -- to smear the man’s eyes and heal him. He used the dust of the earth, the same element from which the Book of Genesis say we were made.

It’s a messy business of mud and spit in the eyes to see the world differently. That’s where we’ve been brought during this difficult time – to a place where we must look at the world, and ourselves differently. In these weeks and surely for a long time to come, we have a choice to make. Will we be supple and pliant like the soil? in my yard that yielded to new planting? Or will be hardened and refuse to grow and change? Can we be flexible in the way we extend love across distances and free ourselves of fear and suspicion?

Will we dare to be the Church in new ways, even as we practice social distancing — or will we forget that we are one body, connected and interdependent, incomplete without each other? Will we have eyes to see God in our neighbors, regardless of whether they are sick or healthy, insured or uninsured, citizen or foreigner, protected or vulnerable? Will we be brave enough to look our own vulnerability — our own mortality — in the eye, and trust that God is with us even in the valley of the shadow of death? Or will we yield to cynicism, panic, and despair?

The Pharisees in today’s gospel refused to see the power of God at work in Jesus.

The man who was healed comes to a gradual insight. When he initially talks to his neighbors and friends about his unexpected sight, he simply refers to his benefactor as “the man called Jesus.” Later, when Jewish leaders interrogate him about the event, he dares go one step further: “He is a prophet,” he proclaims. Finally, at the end of the story, “he worshiped Jesus.” His new-found sight eventually enabled him to see this compassionate stranger as God. In this Season of Lent, a time of self-examination, the gospel invites us to reflect on the state of our own vision. As we see more clearly and feel more deeply our dependence on God and one another, may the healing touch of Jesus remove any blindness from our hearts and give us the vision to see the “Son of Man” -- God in our midst.

A poem entitled “Lockdown,” written by a Franciscan friar in Ireland, has inspired and comforted many people. I’ll close with a few lines from it:
All over the world people are waking up
to a new reality
    to how big we really are.
    to how little control we really have.
    to what really matters.
    to Love.

So, we pray and we remember that
Yes, there is fear.
    But there does not have to be hate.
Yes, there is isolation.
    But there does not have to be loneliness.
Yes, there is panic buying.
    But there does not have to be meanness.
Yes, there is sickness.
    But there does not have to be
disease of the soul.
Yes, there is even death.
    But there can always be a rebirth of love.

Wake to the choices you make
as to how to live now.

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