“Blindness”

Homily by Most Reverend John T. Folda, Bishop of Fargo

March 22, 2020

Fourth Sunday Lent

Live-Streamed from St. Mary’s Cathedral, Fargo

On March 17, 2020, Bishop Folda announced that beginning March 18 the public celebration of Mass would be suspended indefinitely during the COVID-19 health crisis. Beginning March 22, the following Sunday, the celebrations of Bishop Folda’s Sunday Masses at St. Mary’s Cathedral were live streamed on YouTube.

Dear brothers and sisters, I welcome all of you to this live-streamed Mass from St. Mary’s Cathedral. During the health crisis that we find ourselves in, I’m happy to celebrate this Mass with you and for you. I’m keeping all of you and your loved ones in my daily prayers, especially those who are affected by illness, and I look forward to the day when we’ll be able to come together again for the celebration of the Mass. Even though we’re separated at this time for reasons of health, we can be sure that we’re still united in spirit by God’s grace. As members of Christ’s Body, the Church, we’re joined together in him, especially through the Holy Eucharist. I invite you to unite yourself to him through a spiritual communion, and let us continue to pray for each other.

I think we’re all fascinated by miracles and stories of extraordinary healings. Some years ago when I visited our Lady’s shrine at Lourdes, I saw hundreds of crutches left behind by those who had been healed, and I read many miracle stories, stories of miraculous healings that baffle physicians. But actually, the vast majority of those who come to Lourdes are not healed physically. A far greater number receive an even more wonderful gift. They receive a spiritual healing through grace and faith. There are countless confessions, and stories of deepened faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

The same Jesus who has touched so many lives at the shrine of Lourdes is the Jesus who healed the blind man in today’s gospel. When Jesus entered the scene, he found two types of blindness: there was the obvious physical blindness of the eyes; this man was blind from birth. But there was also blindness of the soul. Jesus gave the beggar his sight as a sheer gift, as a sign to all of us that Christ is the Light of the World. No physical blindness could withstand God’s compassion and his power over physical infirmity.

But the blindness of the Pharisees was far deeper. Theirs was a blindness of the soul. They first denied that the beggar was actually blind, then they accused him of heresy, and finally they threw him out. They were so close to Jesus that they couldn’t even admit what they knew to be true. But while the Pharisees refused to believe and see the grace of God in their midst, the beggar did believe, and he saw more and more. First, his eyes were opened, and then his heart: “Lord I do believe.”

This season of Lent is traditionally a time of preparation for baptism, a time of purification and enlightenment. It’s a time of conversion and grace for all of us, a challenging season when we take off the blinders and stop business as usual. We look for the darkness,
blindness in ourselves, and we expose it to the light that is Jesus himself. Just as he healed the blind beggar, he wants to heal us too.

My darkness might be a refusal to forgive someone, or I might be filled with greed and unwilling to give to another. Maybe I’m indifferent to those around me, enclosed in my own self-concern. It might be lust, or pride, thinking I’m better than others. It might be a refusal to believe, to accept Christ, or a refusal to confess my own sinfulness, my own need for God’s forgiveness.

We all know that a dark, closed room can be dangerous and frightening, but in the light it can be beautiful and comfortable. If we close any part of our lives to Christ, then we can’t really become “children of light,” and we remain stuck in the same kind of blindness that kept the Pharisees in darkness. Jesus came to be light for all of us, to illuminate our lives and the path of our days. The Second Vatican Council taught that Jesus reveals us to ourselves. We only really discover who we are and who we are meant to be when we see ourselves in the light of Christ. He came to unlock the light of grace within us, and to cast out the darkness of sin through his mercy and forgiveness.

A healing always brings joy, as so many people at Lourdes have discovered, and as many are experiencing here and now. The blind beggar of the gospel was filled with joy to receive his sight, but he was even more joyful for the gift of faith. In these days of Lent, and in this challenging time of illness and the disruption of so many lives, let us allow the light of God’s grace to fill our hearts, to forgive our sins, and to heal whatever blindness we might have. Jesus tells us, “I am the light of the world…whoever follows me will have the light of life.”