

March 30, 2014  
4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent  
John 9:1-41

## **SEEING CLEARLY**

We have today on this fourth Sunday in Lent, the third in a series of passages from the Gospel of John dealing with sin, sinners and the way encounters with Jesus Christ transforms lives. Actually, it is probably fair to say that virtually every story in the Bible deals with sin, sinners and the transformational saving grace of Jesus Christ. This is another really long passage, full of message upon message, all of which we won't be able to get today. It is also one of the most entertaining passages in the New Testament. Listen to the story.

For several decades now, sociologists have been observing and talking about what they call the erosion of social capital. Basically they are focusing on the breakdown of neighborhoods, the dwindling participation in social institutions like the church, but also like the PTA, community arts organizations such as orchestras and opera. My sister is a volunteer docent at the Minneapolis Museum of Art and she says they have the same problem churches do attracting younger adults to be active and support the museum. Someone wrote a book about this breakdown of social capital called "Bowling Alone." It seems bowling leagues have gone the way of the dinosaur.

Sociologists and preachers are always talking about how important it is to be in community. To have healthy relationships with a variety of other people. The community is supposed to be there to celebrate members' good times and support each other in the hard times. Sociologists are saying the whole attraction to the "make America great again" slogan is a reflection of this perceived loss of a world where life was better, and people were safer, because they had a sense of community and family that doesn't exist anymore. We baby boomers especially have these feelings. We're always talking about remember when kids played out

doors roaming around the neighborhood till dark in the summer time. Remember riding your bike downtown with your friends and no adult supervision. Remember when nobody locked their doors.

We mourn the loss of that sense of community and security. But did it ever really exist? It sure doesn't sound like it from our story today, about the man who had been blind from birth. Each of the social structures in place that should be the source of support and comfort comes up with a big fat zero in terms of living up to the expectations for social capital.

First, you have the ordinary members of the community at large. They all know this blind guy. They've seen him sitting on his corner begging ever since he was a little tyke. They've probably thrown a coin or two to him on occasion. Maybe helped him get a drink of water from the well sometimes. They all worship at the same synagogue.

When Jesus cures him, wouldn't you think his community would all be jumping for joy, celebrating with him. Alleluia! Let's go kill the fatted calf and get this Jesus to turn some water into that great wine like he did at the wedding.

But no. They're just suspicious. Some don't even believe their own eyes. They say, oh it is someone new, someone we've never seen before who just looks like the blind guy. Others keep asking him how did it happen? He just tells them the facts. He was blind, Jesus made mud, spread it on his eyes, told him to go wash, which he did and boom, he can see.

No celebration is forthcoming. They don't believe him. So they haul him off to the religious leaders as if he has committed some kind of crime by getting cured.

You would think, if you believe that things were better before all this modern-day dilution of social capital, that the church would be a place where he would find some comfort and support; someone to share his joy with. But not even close. The Religious Leaders are more than skeptical. They interrogate him as they

would anyone charged with a crime. How did it happen, they want to know. He repeats the story. They don't believe him. So they make him tell the story again. They still don't believe him.

If his story is true, it is a threat to them. It challenges their legitimacy as the leaders of the community. It undermines their authority. So. It must be fake news.

They drag his parents in. Surely his parents will stand up for him. Surely they will share his joy in having received the gift of sight. Nope. They are not celebrating either. They are afraid of the authorities and only worried about their own secure place in the community. Yes this is our son, blind from birth but we have no clue how it happened. He's a grown up. We are not responsible for him anymore. Don't ask us. Ask him.

So, they do. Yet again, they ask him how it happened. They are pressuring him to retract because they don't want to hear anything that is going to support the idea that Jesus is from God and therefore a threat to their superior status in the community. But instead of weakening, the man is getting more assertive. They in fact are making him think it through and the more he thinks about it, the more he understands and the more confident he gets.

The community fails, the religious authorities fail, the family fails. The only trustworthy characters in the story are the man born blind and Jesus. The man tells the truth. His transformation goes far beyond physical sight. In the face of threats, expulsion from the church, and the abandonment of community and family, he sticks to his guns. I was blind but now I see. Over and over, the formerly blind man witnesses to the saving grace of Jesus Christ.

Jesus is the only one the man can trust. And he is the only one we can trust in this story. Although the leaders claim to be the dispensers of grace, it is Jesus who transforms. It is Jesus who heals. It is Jesus who seeks the man out when he is

expelled from the synagogue. It is Jesus who stands with the man in his final isolation. Jesus stands with us too.

You know how it feels when the sun is really bright shining in your eyes and you don't have your sunglasses on? Or when you wake up in the morning and it's pitch black because of daylight savings time and you have to turn on the light? The brightness actually can feel dangerous—harmful. It is so bright your eyes hurt and you can't even see. You have to squint, even shut your eyes. the his family. Jesus, the light that came into the world, shines bright and everyone except the formerly blind man has their eyes closed tight.

We're critical of them of course. But really can you blame them. Wouldn't we all have acted the same way? Really it was the rational thing to do right?

Wrong. Because it was Jesus. As is so often the case with him, everything in this story is counterintuitive. The light of the world is in our midst, and we don't need to shut our eyes. In fact, the best thing to do is to open our eyes wide. We will not be blinded by the light. We are saved by it.