

O God, thank you for each moment.

Ground us to wrestle with whatever comes and a gift and to praise you in it.

Stretch us to grow with whatever comes as a gift and to praise you in it.

Excite us to be open to whatever comes as a gift and to praise you in it.

Amen.

Well the first thing you probably noticed

about the Gospel reading for today is how long it is.

Yes, it was 41 verses.

Now that we got that out of our systems, let's proceed to look at the story.

The first thing to notice is the fine way in which this story was reported,

almost as if a scribe sat by the side of the road

and recorded everything on his laptop.

The dynamics of who said what,

the tensions and interplay between the characters give us much to consider –

truly a story worthy of the Pulitzer prize for journalism.

Now, let's look at the scene itself.

There is a blind man sitting beside the road begging.

We don't know whether he's Jewish or pagan

but it's clear he is not a follower of Jesus.

As Jesus passes by, he doesn't call out to him to help him.

He's so intent on just trying to survive

he probably doesn't even realize that Jesus is close by.

Imagine what it would be like sitting by the side of the road.

People and animals kicking up dust.

Most of the passersby probably ignore you,

not unlike many of us today when confronted by men and women

standing on street corners holding up signs asking for help.

You, the blind man, become aware of a group of people talking

and suddenly you realize that they are talking about you!

“Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

You, who have always been ignored are suddenly the center of attention.

The next thing you know,

someone is slapping wet sticky goo on your eyes

and telling you to go and wash.

No one tells you what to expect

so imagine your astonishment when you wash the mud off

and discover that you can see.

One minute you're a blind beggar minding your own business
and the next you are the subject of a miraculous healing
and then the center of controversy.
People arguing with you and around you
and you didn't really ask for any of it.
I wonder if the blind man didn't wish to be back along the side of the road
with his hands out.
That's the interesting thing about change, especially big changes.
They are often destabilizing,
and their ripples go out to affect everyone around us.
All of our comfortable routines suddenly don't work anymore
and relationships that were solid and sure need to find a new foundation.
We, the person who has changed,
become the target of other people's wishes or fears.
In this story, even this man's parents
have to rethink their relationship with him.

When I was younger, I had laser surgery to correct my vision.
I had worn glasses since the second grade and was very nearsighted
so the thought that I could see without glasses or contacts
sounded like a miracle.
In less than a minute you go from being half blind to having 20/20 vision.
But the biggest surprise was how hard it was to adjust to perfect sight.
I always kind of liked being able to take off my glasses
so that I could retreat into a blurry and less hard-edged world.
The benefits included not being able to see
the black mold in the shower stall
and the balls of dust decorating the book cases.
But suddenly the world was relentlessly in focus
and it made me tired and out of sorts –
too much reality packed into a single day.
So I can imagine, at least a little bit, how very wonderful
but also very hard it must have been for the blind man in this story to see.

So how did all these different players in this story –
the crowd, the Pharisees, the man's parents, the disciples, and Jesus
respond to him?

First there is the crowd who witnesses the miracle
and immediately starts to argue among themselves.
“Is this the same guy who used to sit here and beg?” some ask.

Some say yes. Some say no, he just looks like the same guy.
And in the middle of the arguing crowd, the once-blind man keeps saying,
I am the man, I am the man
but everyone is too busy arguing to pay any attention to him.
Can't you just imagine it?

What about the Pharisees?

Well, they are furious that Jesus broke the Sabbath
by performing the healing.

They direct the blind man to give glory to God and not to Jesus.

How could someone who "sins" by breaking the Sabbath
possibly perform a healing, much less come from God.

God is supposed to operate by the rules.

The blind man doesn't know or doesn't care about the rules.

He says, "I do not know whether he is a sinner.

One thing I do know, that though I was blind, I now see."

The Pharisees can't stand it. They obey the rules. They keep the Sabbath.

But they have never performed any miracles.

Who is this guy who comes along and breaks the rules
and does things that only God could do?

The Pharisees are so obsessed with the rules
that they cannot see that Jesus is God.

The blind man is so caught up in the healing
that all he can see is that Jesus is God.

"Never since the world began has it been heard
that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind.

If this man were not from God, he could do nothing."

The Pharisees want to know where Jesus comes from
and how he healed the blind man's eyes.

They ask the blind man questions but they can't hear what he says.

It seems they are deaf as well as blind, just like the crowd.

The Pharisees don't like his answers

so they seek out his parents asking them what they think.

And oh that mother and father,

how carefully they answer the Pharisees' questions.

They don't want to get into trouble.

So back to the blind man the Pharisees go

and what a piece of work this guy is.

He says, "I have told you already and you would not listen.

Why do you want to hear it again?
Do you also want to become his disciples?"

As interesting as this story about the healing is,
with all of the accusations, explanations,
and different relationships being played out,
what caught my attention most is what frames the story
and that is the subject of sin.

The story begins with the disciples asking Jesus
why the man was born blind, was it due to his parents' sins or his sins.
And the story ends with an exchange between Jesus and the Pharisees
which we did not read this morning.

"Surely we are not blind, are we?" say the Pharisees with that devastating
"are we" added at the end, that crack in their certainty.

Jesus replies, "If you were blind, you would not have sin.
But now that you say, 'we see,' your sin remains."

Who is sinful and who is not, at least in this story,
seem to revolve around the issue of blindness.

The man who was born blind and cannot see
is regarded as not necessarily sinless but a basically good person
who is able to receive Jesus' teaching and healing.

The Pharisees who claim to be able to see are the ones in whom sin remains.
So what does this mean?

That if you're blind, you are a better person than if you can see?

Maybe sight is a symbol here for pride.

If we think that we know and see it all,

then there isn't much anyone can teach us. We are closed human beings.

But if we know that we cannot see,

if we know that we don't know everything,

then there is an openness, a humility, an interest in learning more.

Look at the blind man.

Because he has never really had anything
and has always been a nobody, when Jesus comes to heal him,
he is so grateful, so excited, so ready to give him thanks.

But look at all the other people in this story.

Does any one of them rejoice with the blind man when he is healed?

No, not one.

Even the disciples aren't particularly excited.

His neighbors argue; his parents, sensing trouble, keep their distance.

And the Pharisees of course are quarrelsome and insulting
and finally in total frustration
they just throw the poor old blind guy out of the synagogue.
You would not think to look at these reactions
that something wonderful had just happened,
that the mystery and power of God had just broken in upon them.
Everyone is so caught up in their own rules,
grabbing so hard onto their own certainties
that when a miracle happens,
they turn out to be the ones who are truly blind, the ultimate irony.
Shakespeare could not have crafted a more tragically ridiculous scene.

“Now that you say ‘we see,’ your sin remains, Jesus says to the Pharisees.
What is it the Pharisees saw?
They saw nothing more than their own narrow little world
that they had always lived in.
They saw that a rule had been broken and not a man healed.
Their sin was putting rules before compassion,
the system over an individual.
How would a Pharisee describe this event?
He would say I saw a teacher break the Sabbath today.
What would you have seen? What would you have said?
What is your prayer?
God, please help me to follow the rules
or God please help me to be open
to the miracle of your activity in this world. Amen.