

March 19, 2023
The Fourth Sunday in Lent
Year A
John 9:1-41
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
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Obvious

It was obvious. Men born blind stayed blind. That was just how the world worked.

In a world before modern medicine how you were born was how you lived; if you were lucky enough to survive past childbirth and early childhood, with all of the untreatable diseases that existed that were especially fatal to young children. The parents of the man born blind would have had no hope that anything about his situation would change over the course of his life. He would always be blind, and, in that culture, unable to work, unable fulfill a son's responsibility to support his parents in their old age. It was obvious. All that he would ever be able to do was sit and beg and hope that people's compassion would enable him to support himself. He would have a hard life. It was obvious.

Just like it was obvious in last week's gospel reading that the woman, the Samaritan woman, with her tragic history and her shady lifestyle, would never fit in with the good and respectable women of her community. Just like it was obvious that that Jewish men didn't talk to Samaritan women. None of that could ever change. It was obvious.

Just like it was obvious that Jesus was talking nonsense in our gospel reading three weeks ago, when Nicodemus came and talked to him at night and Jesus talked crazy talk about being born again, being born of water and

the spirit. Nicodemus was right. No one could enter a second time into their mother's womb and be born again. What Jesus said made no sense. It was obvious.

As a child, did your mom or your dad ever kiss an injury that you had, often called, when this remedy is applied, a boo-boo, to make it better? If you're a parent, have you ever done that for your child?

Here's an amazing thing. If you've ever had that particular remedy applied, did you notice that it actually helped. It might feel performative, like a distraction, rather than a real cure, but in fact, sometimes, it actually does make the injury feel better. Partly, I think that the cure is psychological, just knowing someone cares, just knowing that you're not alone in your suffering actually helps you feel better. But perhaps there's something else curative, beyond the simple comfort of compassion and care, in the act of kissing a boo-boo. In the ancient world it was believed that human saliva actually had medicinal properties. So perhaps that is where the origin of kissing something to make it better came from, although, we know now that spitting on things is not actually likely to bring a cure.

But perhaps that explains what, to our modern minds, seems like the grossest aspect of the healing of the man born blind in our gospel reading today. I mean, did Jesus really have to spit into the dirt to cure this man of his blindness? Because, that's what he did.

The scripture tells us that in order to heal the man, Jesus spat on the ground, made mud with the saliva and the dirt of the ground, and put it on the blind man's eyes (John 3:6). Then he told him to go and wash in a particular pool, after which, the man received his sight.

It seems gross. It also seems unnecessary. Throughout the gospels Jesus heals, with a simple word, a simple touch. Why all of the steps, why all of the theatrics this time? Couldn't Jesus have saved himself the time and trouble? Couldn't he have saved the man born blind from the, at least to our minds, disgusting process of having saliva mud spread on his eyes?

Of course, Jesus could have healed the man a different way. But there are two reasons that I can think of that might be why Jesus did what he did in the case of this healing.

One of those reasons loops us back to the Nicodemus gospel reading in John 3, when Jesus confused Nicodemus with his strange words about being born again, being born anew, being born from above. Another way of describing the idea of being born again is to think of it as being recreated. What Jesus tells Nicodemus is dripping with symbolism from the creation story; the whirling work of the Holy Spirit, the taming of chaos waters, and the creative work of God, laboring over the dust and dirt of the earth, in Hebrew, the Adamah, to bring forth the creation of the earth creature, the Adam.

In John 3 Jesus tells Nicodemus that “no can see the kingdom of God without being born from above” (John 3:3). In today's gospel reading from John 9, Jesus himself brings forth a new creature, a new creation, with the dust and dirt of the earth, giving sight to the man born blind, recreating him, making him a new man; a man who can see, not just the physical world, but ultimately the truth of the kingdom of God.

The second reason that Jesus might have gone through all of the machinations to heal the man born blind, could actually have been to set up a confrontation with the religious leaders. Because the day that Jesus ran into

the man born blind was a sabbath day and, in making the mud with his own saliva, Jesus was working on the sabbath.

The gospels are full of conflicts between Jesus and the religious leaders as a result of his healing on the sabbath. The goodness, the compassion, the mercy of God could not be constrained even by the rules of the Sabbath, but people who were tasked with keeping the religious order could not see that. The religious leaders could not believe that God's mercy was greater, even than God's law. To them, it was obvious that even healing should not be done on the sabbath. So, when Jesus healed the man born blind on the sabbath, especially the way that he did it, a way that involved obvious work on Jesus' part, he was setting up yet another show down, yet another conflict with the religious leaders.

But why would Jesus want that? Why would he, the Prince of Peace, desire conflict with the leaders of his own religion? Maybe because he wanted to challenge conventional wisdom. He wanted to challenge the obvious. And he wanted to create a new community where people who once were on the outside were invited in, into the center, where they were welcomed and included, fully human and fully beloved, no longer on the outside looking in.

At the end of our gospel reading for today, the man born blind could see, but he could see more than just what was physically in front of him. He could see the reality of Jesus. The man who had received his sight, as a new creation, could see what had been promised. He could see the kingdom of God, made manifest in Jesus, who he believed in, who he worshiped. It was obvious to him that in Jesus, God was acting in the world, for goodness, for healing, for restoration.

In last Sunday's gospel reading Jesus went beyond the obvious, talking to the Samaritan woman at the well, making her his messenger, his missionary. His actions put her, a rejected woman, at the center of the new community of those who believed in Jesus. This new community that Jesus created was made up of those who had been rejected and cast out, as well as those who were simply willing to believe that God could be and was doing a new thing in the world, and were willing to make room for those who their community's conventional wisdom said should be excluded.

In this Sunday's gospel reading the man born blind is thrown out of his community, because Jesus healed him, because of Jesus' action in his life. It was obvious to his community; to his parents, to his religious leaders, to his neighbors, that he was a sinner and a blasphemer, because he saw the goodness of God in Jesus.

But instead of being abandoned and alone, Jesus came to get the man who could now see, to include him in the community that Jesus was creating, where God's love, can and does recreate us, as people and as communities. God's love makes us people, makes us communities, where God's compassion, God's goodness, God's mercy, can and should be obvious. And we, who, by the grace of God, can see, are a part of that community. Thanks be to be God. Amen.