

Feb. 11, 2018 – (Transfiguration Sunday, John)

Sermon Text – John 9:1-41

- Jesus heard that they had driven [the man who had been born blind] out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" He answered, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him." Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." He said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped him. Jesus said, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind." Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, "Surely we are not blind, are we?" Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains." -

This is Transfiguration Sunday. For many, many years now, you have heard the story of Jesus going up the mountain with three of his disciples, Peter, James and John, there to appear transformed between Moses and Elijah, glowing white and radiant in all of his heavenly glory. Matthew, Mark and Luke all tell that story, but John does not. He includes no account of the transfiguration in his gospel. But he tells many other stories. So, the narrative lectionary organizers have tried to find one that has a similar emphasis on seeing clearly who Jesus is. They have given us the story of Jesus healing a man born blind. The two stories seem to share this theme in common. They are both about seeing Jesus, seeing Jesus clearly, seeing Jesus in all his glory. And, of course, that means they are also about not seeing Jesus, not seeing him clearly, and not seeing him in all his glory. And, as we have already learned, when the invitation to "come and see" is one of the central ideas in the gospel, seeing Jesus is what this is all about.

The story begins with the question of sin. "Who sinned," the disciples ask Jesus, "this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" You may think that we have moved beyond such questions in our day. We understand the mechanisms of the eye. We know how they are formed. And we can explain how that development sometimes goes wrong. Blindness happens. No one is at fault. But, that doesn't always satisfy everyone. People want an explanation. They want to know reasons. A seminary student at Luther Seminary, who was born without an arm, tells the story of how she was told that her parents must have done something terribly wrong, that she should be born missing a limb. And Rolf Jacobson, Luther Seminary Professor and one of the authors of the Narrative Lectionary, who had both of his legs amputated because of a childhood cancer, tells how his mother was told that she must not have fed him enough vegetables. Neither of those explanations hold any water. But they are out there. Everyone

wants to know “Why?” There has to be a reason. It must be sin. Jesus says, “No, no one sinned; but, given that the man is blind, now you will see the glory of God.” He then proceeds with the healing. A little spit, a little dirt, a little mud in your eyes and a washing in the Pool of Siloam. There’s nothing magical about that; but, the man listens to Jesus. He does what he says. That is a sign of faith. And, as we have heard before, it results in a great thing that happens. The man sees for the very first time.

But “seeing” for John means much more than just having your eyes open and working. It also has to do with perceiving and understanding. To “see” is to “know.” In the chapter that precedes our story, Jesus first declares, “I am the light of the world.” He then follows his promise with, “Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” And that statement transitions to the ensuing conversation, which results in Jesus’ saying, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.” The Jewish leaders respond with one of the most ironic statements in all the Bible. They say, “We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone.” That’s just wrong! Strangely, though they are students of the scriptures, they have forgotten that it is the story of liberation from slavery in Egypt, the Exodus, that lies at the center of their history with God and that they live in a land long occupied and controlled by foreign powers and governments. They have been slaves more than they can imagine. And Jesus wants to redefine slavery anyway, to include slavery to sin, which affects everyone.

And so, the blind man having been healed, the story circles back around to the topic with which we began. The miracle of the healing is so great, in the minds of the religious authorities, that there must be something sinful involved in it. The sin could lie with the blind man. Either he has been faking all these years or the man who now sees is not the same man who has been blind since birth. His neighbors can’t decide. Or the sin lies with Jesus. The healing, after all, was done on the Sabbath. This is not the first time Jesus has disregarded the rules. “But,” the man argues, “such a healing could not have been done by a sinner. God would not have listened to him.” So, the question-ing goes on. The leaders speak to the man’s parents and then to the man again. The facts are established. This is the man. He was blind. Now, he sees. And Jesus, the man who made the mud and put it on the blind man’s eyes, is the intervening factor. He is the one who makes all the difference. And, like the woman at the well in last week’s story, the man born blind will bear witness to him in a most tentative and awkward manner. He asks the religious leaders, “Why do you want to hear [my story] again?” And then in my most Minnesotan of translations, “You don’t also want to be his disciples, do you?” Their answer is, “Of course, not!” But, for the

man born blind, the evidence is overwhelming. Jesus must be from God. Otherwise, he would never have been able to do such a thing!

The leaders do not see it. They cannot see it. They are blinded by their own seeing. And their failure “to see,” their inability to perceive and to understand who Jesus is, leaves them trapped in their own sinfulness. Even as the blind man’s eyes have been opened and he has gone from calling Jesus “a man,” to referring to him as “a prophet” to worshipping him as the “Son of Man,” the eyes of the Jewish leaders have been closing ever more tightly, as they refuse to see the one who stands before them as sent by God. In the end, Jesus will tell them that their sin remains. They are still slaves, even if they do not know it. They are still slaves, and they continue to live in darkness. They are still slaves, and the promise of life is not in them. They are still slaves. And so, John issues his unwritten invitation, appropriate for our consideration on Transfiguration Sunday: “Open your eyes. See Jesus. He is the light of the world. Let his words and his teachings illuminate your minds. And allow his presence to shine the light of life into your world, so that you may know him as God; and, knowing him, you may have life in his name.”

Amen.