

March 22, 2020

The Fourth Sunday in Lent

Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Milan, WI

St. John Ev. Lutheran Church, Edgar, WI

Text: John 9:1-41

In the Name of the Father and the ✠ Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Deism was a fashionable religion during the 18th century and was claimed by several of our Founding Fathers, including Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin. Deists believed that a god existed, that he created the universe and established certain rules and constants to make it all tick, but then he stepped away. This is often called the “clockmaker god”, since they believed he wound up the universe like a clock and then let it go. The Deist god does not interact with the world. To the Deist, Jesus was just a wise teacher, a good man accused of a crime he didn’t commit. But God in the flesh? God who interacted with His creation in a real, physical way? No.

That is how many people think of God today. Maybe God did stuff in the past, but now he doesn’t interact with the universe at all. They think wrongly that the phrase “*God helps those who help themselves*” is from the Bible, but it is not. That is from Ben Franklin. They don’t believe that God is present in our lives and certainly not present here in worship. “God can’t do that” is not just the refrain of unbelievers. There is absolutely such a thing *belief* in God without trust in Him. That is what the devil has. The devil knows God exists and is active in the world. The devil knows that Jesus not only walked the earth but is the incarnate Son of God. The devil knows Jesus was crucified and was buried and was raised from the dead. That’s more belief than Thomas Jefferson had. But neither Jefferson nor the devil had faith, because faith is more than acknowledging a fact. Faith is trust. Trust that He does what He says He will do.

Even among the very pious Jews of Israel, faith was an anemic thing, having form but little strength. The Gospels are full of people rejecting Jesus because He did things He wasn’t “supposed” to do. He talked to women. He ate with the most hated members of society, sinners and tax collectors and even Samaritans. Instead of breaking down the walls of unbelief, His acts of mercy only made the stubborn and proud dig in their heels. In their arrogance they said, “*Because I don’t like that, it must not be from God.*” And that same arrogance is alive and well today.

What happened at the beginning of our Gospel reading today is easy to overlook. The disciples saw the blind man and they knew that he had been blind from birth. They had probably seen him every time they went to Jerusalem, on the same corner begging for alms. So they asked Jesus, “**Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?**” (v.2) That was a common belief back then... and it has not entirely disappeared. When bad things happen it is common to look for someone to blame. This is also a danger in our own current predicament with the COVID-19 virus. Riddled with fear and anxiety, people start to turn on one another. They look for someone to blame, like the disciples tried to do. Who failed that the virus got to America, to Wisconsin, to Marathon county? Who sinned that my

grandmother got sick? Jesus replied to them, **“It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him.”** (v.4). No one caused this man to be blind. His ailment was the result of the brokenness of the world, the universal effect of sin, but not the wrath of God. God is merciful... which is why He sent us His Son.

Jesus could have healed this man with a word or a wave of his hand, as he did at other times. But on this day He did something different. Why? Jesus healed him in the way He did to knock down the Pharisee’s assumptions and the people’s prejudices. He healed the blind man in a very physical way, dirty and gross. Jesus spat on the ground and used His own spittle to make mud, kneading it together into a paste. It was a very primal thing to do. By this, He demonstrated His mastery over creation by using His stuff as He saw fit. Oh, I can’t use ordinary things for extraordinary purposes? I suppose I can’t give an 80 year old woman a child, can I? I suppose you think I can’t use a burning bush to talk my chosen prophet, either? God does interact with the universe because He made it and it is His and He decides what can and cannot be done with it. Use dirt and spittle to heal a man born blind? That is no less amazing than parting the Red Sea.

There is another subtle thing going on here. One of the 39 forms of work prohibited on the Sabbath was “kneading of dough”, which the Pharisees expanded to mean any type of kneading or mixing. So by spitting in the dirt and mixing it into mud, Jesus was to once again showing the Pharisees that God is not bound by any manmade rules. After smearing the mud on the man’s eyes, Jesus sent him to the pool of Siloam to wash his eyes. Obviously, the blind man couldn’t do this by himself. He had to be guided there by others, leading him through town with everyone looking and saying “What’s going on? Why’s that guy have mud on his eyes?” This miracle was designed to create a spectacle, and it did. He washed his eyes and for the first time in his life, he could see.

This act kindled faith in many, including the blind man, but many responded with the same old response: “God can’t do that.” The Pharisees were not happy for the man nor were they joyous that the Messiah had come into the world. They were troubled. God can’t do these things, they said. God has to stay in the box we created for Him.

One of the hardest things for us humans to do is to let God be God. We take our limited knowledge and intellect and try to bind Him with it, telling Him what we think the rules should be. We are all guilty of it, especially when it comes to forgiveness. God cannot forgive that person, because their sins are too black, their crimes too horrible. I can’t forgive them, which means God can’t forgive them, either. That is basically the same as deism: An impotent god kept at a distance. But it’s not God’s problem, it is ours.

Christ Jesus came to free us from this very bondage, the bondage of unbelief. He confronted the Pharisees and some of them believed in Him. He surprised His disciples again and again, doing the unthinkable, saying things that required faith. And He does it again, here, today. He is going to give us His Body and Blood to eat and drink for our salvation. God can do that and He does. Because He wants you to know, truly know, that He has paid for your transgressions and forgives you all your sins. Even your sin of doubt. He opens your eyes in a way no less miraculous than He did that blind man, giving you the eyes to see His salvation, the ears to hear His Word, the faith to believe His promises. It is His creation and we are His creatures. He can do whatever He wants with it. And what He wants is to make you His own.

In Jesus' holy name, Amen.

Rev. Schopp