

CIRCLE OF MERCY SERMON

John 9:1-41

MARCH 26TH, 2017

BLINDNESS: SEEN AND UNSEEN

BY TYRONE GREENLEE

Thank you for the opportunity to share with you tonight. I'm always honored to have the podium at Circle.

“Who sinned here?” That question from the disciples just leaps of the page at me whenever I read this passage. It is significant I think that the focal point of the passage is not the individual who was blind from birth, who spent his days begging at the gate, and now for the first time in his life can actually see-his world, his parents- he can now find work other than begging-he can see! The focus is not on the miracle-the actual miraculous event that happened in front of many witnesses. The focus is on who caused the blindness –who sinned here-the man or his parents. The focus is on why Jesus is healing on the Sabbath- and the focus is on who this Jesus person is that he is able to perform miracles. The formerly blind man-and his parents-are pulled into the conversation/debate around these issues-when, really, they should have been at Applebees or somewhere celebrating this huge turn in the life of their family.

“Who sinned here-the man or his parents?” Whose fault is this? Where can we lay blame for this man’s life long blindness? I’m not sure if the disciples were actually asking Jesus to respond to this question, or if they were asking Jesus to step into the debate of the time around the belief that anyone born with a physical malady was affected by that malady because of sin on someone’s part. And then we have the Pharisees-who are so eager to convict Jesus for his behavior on the Sabbath and are eager to question His authority to perform miracles-on the Sabbath or any other day. What’s missing here is the acknowledgement-the realization- of the manifestation of God’s glory and healing power in the life of this young man. There is, indeed, a great deal of spiritual blindness in this story.

During this season of Lent we in the Christian tradition are encouraged to engage in a period of self examination, prayer, sacrifice, and repentance- we are asked to look at and root out those areas in our lives that are keeping us from full communion with God. With that in mind as I studied this story of the healing of the blind man, I could not help but think, about those places in my life where I intentionally and unintentionally refuse to see. Those places that are too painful, or frightening, or would require too much of me to look at –those spaces that would require some real repentance in my life, a real turning

away from certain behaviors, those places where blindness suits me, where blindness sustains me, where blindness keeps me from the truth. Where and when have I walked right passed miracles in my path without so much as a nod in that direction?

Last November my brother and his girlfriend invited me to thanksgiving dinner at her house in Waynesville. Through several conversations with my brother previous to thanksgiving I knew that his girlfriend was a Trump supporter, and that that was an area of some contention between them. I went- somewhat grudgingly to the dinner where, very intentionally on all our parts, the subject of the election never came up. I came and went from this woman's home-where she showed me some pretty radical hospitality-with a heart full of resentment towards her for what I believed she and like minded others had done to this country. This woman-this perfectly lovely woman – who has had some serious trials and struggles and who completely, honestly believed that a Trump presidency would give her a better life- opened her home to me and worked really hard to be a great host. And I had not an ounce of compassion or understanding for her. Who sinned here?

The question for me-for all of us – is around how we move through these unarguably dark times with grace, with dignity,

with mercy for ourselves and others. Because, honestly, none of us –individually or as an society, as a nation-will survive if we don't find a new way-a way that is about true compassion, listening, and understanding. Not just giving the appearance of listening, not just tolerating the other-whoever we have decided the "other" is –but true, open hearted, relationship building with those whose opinions may differ from ours or those whose beliefs or actions go against what we believe.

A couple of weeks ago we were privileged to hear a wonderful sermon from Guy Sayles about our identity as Christians. At one point in his sermon he talked about our identities as "Beloved children of God". I walked out of the Circle that night with the overwhelming realization that I no longer believe that's who I am-somehow, in the midst of the darkness, sadness, anger, and grief and emptiness in my heart, I had forgotten who I was-I had forgotten how God sees me.

And that, I believe, is where the healing begins-to understand and to fully internalize the miracle that each one of us is- as we move toward a wider scope of healing for our communities and nation. An acceptance of our own miraculous nature-an acceptance that radiates from inside us and permeates all parts of us-an acceptance of ourselves that shatters the blindness and allows us to see others as the miracles they are –

no matter how they voted or where they stand politically- that is how we start the process of healing. And we must also internalize-and make real in our lives-the understanding-that every difficult circumstance-no matter how difficult, dark, frightening or seemingly impossible-is, as Jesus says in our passage tonight, an opportunity for the work of God to come alive in that situation. It –whatever the it is-is an opportunity for us as believers to show the world what a mighty God we serve.

As many of know I work at a local charter school. Several years ago I became acquainted with a young man who was to become one of my closest friends. Our friendship continued after he graduated from our school, through his high school years, and continues now as he completes his third year of college. Michael is –in spite of his youth-one of the most grounded, wise, good-hearted human beings I have ever known. Last fall he texted me and invited me to attend the Donald Trump rally which was to happen in Asheville in September. My response to him was not kind. I questioned why he wanted to attend such a rally, I questioned his motives, and, although he clearly told me he was not a Trump supporter, I accused him of having a hand in something that would one day destroy my community. I may very well have done damage to a friendship that means a great deal to me. How might that conversation been different if I had seen the miracle

in front of me –this young man, who was not only offering to spend time with me, but-I also think-in hindsight-was seeking some sort of approval from me for doing something he thought might hurt me. How did I miss this opportunity to deepen connection and relationship with his young man, and show him the love of Christ?

One of my favorite films is an animated feature titled “How To Train Your Dragon”. “How Train Your Dragon” is a story, set in Viking times of a teenager named Hiccup whose greatest desire in life is to be a dragon slayer in the tradition of his fore parents-as dragons are the sworn enemies of his people. In his quest to slay his first dragon, Hiccup seriously wounds one of the most dangerous breeds of dragons-and-ends up nurturing the dragon back to health. What unfolds is a beautiful tale of acceptance and relationship building and an end to the blindness that had affected both humans and dragons. I love this film and highly recommend it for the many lessons it holds for all of us.

Sisters and brothers, our very lives-our futures-depend on our ability-our willingness to see past the blindnesses-the many ways that our fears, our privileges, our ignorance of each other-blind us to the truth. The truth of who we are and who our

neighbors are. And, this same blindness stops us from seeing – and being true manifestations of the power and glory of God. I ask you-actually I beg each of you-and myself-to walk through the world differently this Lenten season and beyond-look for-actively seek out-the manifestations of Christ-even in-especially in-those dark and difficult places in your life. Amen.