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1 Samuel 16:1-13

John 9:1-41

EYES OPENED

Jesus encountered a man who had been blind since birth. The man had a health problem that led to an economic problem for him. At that time, those who were visually impaired had little opportunity to provide for themselves other than through begging. That was the man's economic condition when Jesus came by. A health problem that leads to an economic problem - that sounds uncomfortably familiar. Jesus made a mud paste, put it on the man's eyes, and told him to go wash in a particular pool. That man was used to not being able to see the way forward.

But, such a condition is a bit new to those of us facing the challenges of a coronavirus pandemic, who have been hit with a health problem that is impacting us economically, who feel like we are covered in mud and not yet to the place of getting to wash ourselves clean so there would be the prospect of clearly seeing where we are going. Our story today helps us see some things that are not helpful in such a situation.

Frequently, in the gospels accounts, Jesus' disciples don't get their following of Jesus quite right, and that is true again here. Before Jesus addressed the man, the disciples were ready to turn this poor man into an object lesson. Their question illustrated how they saw things. Acting as if the man was not only visually impaired, but also hearing impaired, they ask Jesus in the man's presence, who it was who did something to lead to his blindness. Was it (a) the man's sinfulness or (b) his parents' sinfulness? It had to be one or the other in order to for them to hold onto their simplistic practice of interpreting life – in this case, seeking clarity through blame. Both possible answers assumed that the blindness was heaven-sent as an expression of divine judgment. But Jesus doesn't choose (a) or (b). He chooses answer (c): none of the above or this is not from above. He rejects the notion that physical ailment is an expression of God's judgment. Instead he said these kinds of situations are an opportunity for God's good intent of greater vision and wholeness to be sought.

Frequently, in the gospel accounts, the religious leaders described don't get it right either, and that is true again here. Later in the story, when the man who had been blind has been healed, it would make sense for there to be a great celebration. But instead, there's this series of conversations that demonstrate a sense of confusion, consternation, and controversy. The religious leaders had paid so little attention to the destitute in their midst that when the man who had been blind was no longer in his place as a beggar, they had difficulty recognizing him. The whole story doesn't fit in with their preconceived notions and they decide that the story is a fraud and set out to prove just that.

In doing so, they find out that the supposed healer had kneaded clay in order to put mud on the man's eyes. This all had happened on the Sabbath and kneading clay was one of 39 categories of work forbidden on the Sabbath. More than a thousand years earlier, seven days a week the Hebrew people as slaves in Egypt, had been forced to knead clay into bricks. And so God established, for their health and well-being, that there was to be a day each week when the kneading of clay and other forms of physical work were not to take place. But that prohibition was not put in place to prevent the kneading of clay for the purpose of healing. Sabbath observance was intended for everyone's health and well-being.

What we are going through now could be seen as similar to a Sabbath observance, when there are things we refrain from doing, that allows for greater health, that enables us to see things differently. The man who was formerly blind didn't fit into the religious leaders' theology and this Jesus who purportedly healed him didn't fit either, so they would turn a blind eye to it all, and label them both as 'sinners.' Instead of seeing the wonderful thing God had done evidenced right in front of them, these authorities saw only their own narrow reading of scripture, using it to shame someone. When they couldn't disprove the man's story, they run him off. This story is so full of irony. A man who was blind from birth ends up being able to see and everyone else in the story can't see a blessed thing even when the blessed thing was a person who was right before their eyes.

The United States Navy Sea, Air, and Land Teams, commonly known as Navy SEALs, are the Navy's primary special operations force. William McRaven, a retired Navy admiral, tells this story about his training: "For a would-be Navy SEAL, Hell Week is the worst week of the toughest military training in the world. It is six days of no sleep, constant physical and mental harassment, and one 'special

day' at the Mud Flats. The Mud Flats are an area between San Diego and Tijuana, Mexico, where the water comes together and creates a swampy patch of terrain, a muddy bog that tests your determination to be a SEAL.

My training class had been out of the mud for a short period of time when the instructors, looking to weed out the weak of mind and body, ordered the entire group of 55 men back into the bog. The mud consumed each man until there was nothing visible but our heads. We were all exhausted, numb from the cold and desperate to hold on. The instructors told us that we could all leave the mud — if just five men quit. It was the instructors' way of turning us against each other.

It was apparent that some of the trainees were about to give up. There were still eight hours to go before the sun rose — eight more hours of bone-chilling cold. Several of the students started moving to dry ground; they were ready to quit. And then, one voice began to echo through the night — one voice raised in song. The song was terribly out of tune but sung with great enthusiasm. One voice became two, and two became three, and before long the entire class was singing. The instructors threatened us with more time in the mud if we kept singing, but the singing persisted. Those of us stuck in the mud believed that if one of us could start singing when he was up to his neck in mud, then maybe the rest of us could make it through the night. And we did.”¹

As we reflect on this story from John's Gospel, we could follow the example of the disciples and use our current situation as reason to assume this pandemic is an expression of God's judgment and we could seek to lay blame on someone responsible for its origin. We could follow the example of the religious authorities and use a situation as a reason to cast shame on folks we don't like. But something tells me that our purpose is not to lay blame or to cast shame. At a point where we are covered with mud and have not yet gotten to the pool to wash it off, our purpose has to be to welcome the presence of Jesus, who comes to touch us at our point of infirmity, to follow the guidance of Jesus, who sends us to be washed clean, to open ourselves to the new vision Jesus offers so we can see where we are to go from here. And in the meantime, even while still covered with mud, may we sing of the compassion and care we have received and we can share, may we sing in order to

keep our community together until there is the break of dawn and we can be washed clean and experience God's healing, may we sing of God's sustaining spirit and hope that leads us through this challenging time. And when we see, when we see that our healing has come, we will be well-rehearsed to sing our celebration of God's goodness and love, in all the ways that the world experiences it. Thanks be unto God. Thanks be unto God. Thanks be unto God. Amen.

¹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-coronavirus-has-thrown-us-all-in-the-mud-but-an-end-is-in-sight/2020/03/19/7bb4ddda-6a02-11ea-abef-020f086a3fab_story.html