

Sermon for Lent 4A
Sunday, March 19, 2023
“The Struggle is the Gospel”

Text: John 9:1-41; Psalm 23

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

First let me say that today’s Gospel reading is not the longest in our lectionary. The Gospel readings during Lent are increasingly longer until we will read the mother of all Gospel lessons, the Passion in two weeks on Palm Sunday, so be advised. As I was thinking about how the story of Jesus and the Man Born Blind related to our own stories, I concluded that the story is about struggle. The struggle *is* the gospel story.

There are six struggles that I think should be considered. Let’s look at the people involved:

1. The man who was blind from birth.
 - This man probably had a very difficult life. The society in which he lived was not particularly kind to people with disabilities. Most people believed that a physical deformity was the result of sin committed by the parents or the individual him-/herself. Since he was born blind, people might have blamed the parents. The man might have been treated unfairly by his family, and as he was “of age” in the story, he probably lived on the streets and was forced to live as a beggar. They didn’t have social programs to assist people with disabilities.
2. The disciples who struggled to figure out who had sinned.
 - Again, it was a common belief in Hebrew society that if the man had been born blind it was punishment for somebody’s sin. Hence, the questions: “Who sinned? This man or his parents?”
3. The neighbors struggled to believe that the man had really been healed.
 - Such a monumental miracle defied expectation. Even in our own time, we struggle to believe events that defy our expectations. We need proof. We expect some type of validation or explanation for things that occur, but sometimes things happen that we just can’t explain.
4. The Pharisees struggled to stay faithful to the Law, so much so that they could not see the grace in the miracle that Jesus had done.
 - Instead of rejoicing at the restoration of that man’s sight, the Pharisees chided Jesus for healing on the Sabbath. They couldn’t imagine that a true man of God would violate God’s fourth commandment to keep the Sabbath day holy.
5. So now, the man who had struggled with being marginalized because he was blind was marginalized yet again from his community for having been healed on the Sabbath.

- You'd think that once the man's disability was taken away, he would be welcomed into his community with open arms. Instead, in their own blindness of prejudice against a man whom they were accustomed to excluding, they found another way to exclude him, despite his being restored to wholeness.
6. The struggle of Jesus to make even the most learned among the crowd, the Pharisees, to see him for who he really is.
 - Even though they witnessed signs before their very eyes, they failed to recognize Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God, as someone with profound wisdom about God's grace and mercy.

Today's Gospel message for the 4th Sunday in Lent teaches us something valuable for our own lives: that we all struggle. The season of Lent offers us the opportunity and the space to recognize that we all have struggles and life is a series of struggles. We struggle in our personal lives, we struggle in our family life, we struggle in our church life, we struggle in our careers and professional life, we struggle in our civic and political life. We struggle to see God working in our lives and in the lives of others. Struggle is an ongoing reality of the human experience. Even when things are going well for us, we may still struggle over something. If we get that job we wanted, we might struggle to make free time for ourselves and our families. If we had all the money in the world, we'd still struggle over how to spend it, where to invest it, or how to prevent others from taking it. If we're enjoying good health, we struggle at how to stay healthy.

As you go away today having heard the struggles in today's Gospel, think about where you are struggling. Here are a few questions you might think about:

1. Where am I struggling in my life?
2. What are my shortcomings that force me to struggle to love myself and believe that I can be a better person?
3. How have I let my own fears, presumptions, and prejudices cause me to be blind to the needs of others and unable to see the movement of God in their lives?
4. Am I able to see God moving in the midst of a conflict that is happening around me right now? The people in the Gospel story focused on blindness of the man and the timing of his healing to lay blame, instead of taking it as an opportunity to see God at work. Can I avoid blaming myself or others for a conflict and see an opportunity for God to work through us?
5. How have I struggled to do the right thing or live a faithful life?
6. How have I excluded others personally or participated in the ways my community and society has excluded those who are different or those whom we don't understand?
7. Have I failed to see Christ in myself and others?

8. Do I inspire others by who I am and how I live? Do I demonstrate God's love and mercy? How can I change my life so that I am a faithful reflection of God's love for us?

The psalm today, Psalm 23, offers us comfort for the struggles that we face, because in the midst of all our struggles, God walks with us. He walks with us to heal us when we've been wounded; he walks with us to lead us by the hand to give us wisdom and get us through it. "Yea, though I walk through the valleys and the shadows of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me." Our Good Shepherd leads us by the hand during our struggles and strengthens us to face each struggle that we encounter. We need not fear, because God will always be with us. If we confide in that, then we can live a happier and more fulfilling life knowing that God's goodness and mercy follow us all the day of our lives. Don't let your struggles consume you; seek the hand of Almighty God and let him lead you in the paths of righteousness and comfort. Amen.