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Year A
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Prepare our hearts, O God, to accept your Word. Silence in us any voice but your own, that, hearing, we may also obey your will; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

ON INCARNATION, SALIVA AND MUD

JOHN 9:1-14

Jesus heals a blind beggar in John's Gospel. That was the first sentence of the first faith statement that I ever submitted to a presbytery considering me for membership. If this story feels strangely familiar, perhaps it is because you attended the February meeting of the Presbytery of Sheppards and Lapsley in Eufala where I was approved to serve as your pastor (and now you fear that already I am beginning to repeat myself). Or maybe you were wide awake during today's first reading (thanks to a second cup of coffee). Perhaps both?

Yes, I am repeating myself (to pretend otherwise would be disingenuous), not because I lack creativity (though maybe I do) or because I am lazy (though maybe I am), but because this story is amazingly powerful. It stays with me in ways that others do not.

Attribute this story's staying power to shock value, poetic felicity or biographical fact. Jesus' healing of a blind beggar is one of the grittier stories in John, the Gospel that is most concerned with Jesus' divinity (as opposed to his humanity). The story is beautiful. Sight (and insight) comes from having an appropriate, yet intimate, relationship with the earth. This is natural medicine at its best. Nothing is sanitary. The American Medical Association would not approve. Jesus does not wave a magic wand or say, "Abracadabra." He spits on the earth (a disgusting habit that Mary and Joseph probably prohibited when Jesus was Kai or Lydia's age). With saliva and mud dripping from his fingers, he caresses a beggar's face and then watches and waits for him to go Siloam, from whence he returns with clearer vision.

As a person with a physical disability, the story of Jesus healing a blind beggar is potentially disconcerting. If Jesus healed this man, then why has not he healed me? Did I forget to sign up? Of course, if I did not have an obvious disability, chances are that I, given the cultural factors involved, would be placing an order for a different physical adjustment. Almost everybody that I know well laments a particular feature of his or her body: "Oh, to be shorter, taller, lighter, heavier, blonde, brunette, bald, etc." Surely, nobody here has ever said anything like this, but maybe---just maybe---you know someone who has.

Whether I know what you are thinking or not, God does. In Jesus Christ, God experiences saliva and mud, and by God's willingness to become as earthy as we are, we experience God. What I appreciate about Jesus in this particular rendering of him is that he weighs what is expected of him, especially at the synagogue, and then subverts seemingly every expectation.

Jesus rejects the assumption that if a person has a physical disability, then he or she is being punished for somebody's sinfulness: maybe his, maybe hers or Mom's or Dad's or one of the grandparents' (may Lydia never be punished for the sins of her father). Scripture reports that his disciples (plural) ask (apparently in unison), "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Scripture does not say that Jesus sighs, but somewhere, in the distance, I hear him sighing, "No, you numbskulls, 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned (rumors to the contrary notwithstanding); he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.'"

God's works revealed in a blind man? Jesus calls into question another assumption, one that is a corollary of the first. If God is inflicting punishment by disability, then why would God's works be revealed in a blind man? Theory: To offend those who feel qualified to pass judgment on their neighbors, and who, if given half-a-chance, would abuse others to substantiate their prejudices. Labeling a person "blind," "deaf," "lame" or otherwise "disabled" worked to their advantage in the past, but not in the shadow of the one who John calls "the light of the world."

To those who fear change, healing is a frightful proposition. When the lame walk, the deaf hear and the blind see, labels have to be reprinted, because comfort zones implode. Prejudices have to be abandoned or the individuals who have invested so much in pushing others to the side will find themselves pushed aside. This terrifies the powerful, because so much of their power is predicated on lies, lies that they tell to themselves (self-deception) and lies that are told to justify their prejudices and to perpetuate the fantasy that they are somehow better than their neighbors.

Among their neighbors, who also are our neighbors, are the poor. American prejudices toward those who lack economic wherewithal run deeply, in part because the American caste exists to serve the demographics that have been in power the longest. Of course, the abuse of power says more about who we are as human beings than it does about who we are as Americans. Prejudices toward the poor are older than the New Testament, and we find them in there too.

Notice what the neighbors say about the blind beggar when he returns from bathing in the pool of Siloam: "The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar begin to ask, 'Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?'" The neighbors' questions suggest that this person has been marked more by his economic status than by his disability, an observation which prompts me to celebrate that there is more than one miracle in this story. Jesus not only heals a blind man. He heals a person who is hungry and thirsty; he heals a person who survives by his willingness to beg.

Again, Jesus subverts social expectations. Shouldn't he be healing a person who could contribute more to the church budget? This person does not even have health insurance. An HMO would not have him; and considering his unorthodox healing practices, the one whom Luke champions as "the Great Physician" would probably be branded "out-of-network."

It is difficult to argue with the success of Jesus' practices. Who would have thought that saliva and mud would be so useful? The same God who created them, the same God who created you and me. But saliva and mud are nasty? So are you and I. Adam, one of God's creations in the Genesis story,

is translated “dirt.” When Lent began on Ash Wednesday, clergy throughout the world reminded the church (which includes us): “Dust we are; and to dust we will return.” Without saliva, life becomes dry; our life together becomes dusty. Nothing sticks, and as much as we may value Teflon in particular areas of our life and culture, it is that which stays with us that renders life meaningful.

Now for the imperatives: answers to the question, “How do we integrate this story into ours: (1) spit (not now...later); (2) play in the mud; and (3) go where you are sent. Allow me to explain...

Spit: If you have ever had a severe cold and felt as if your head might spontaneously combust, you understand the relief that comes with spitting (and not just any spitting, spitting that originates from deep within the nasal passages). The ritual is cleansing; it brings about healing by eliminating congestion. By spitting into the dirt and rubbing mud into a blind beggar’s face, Jesus helps this person to confront the darkness in him and to create space in his life for the Spirit to dwell.

Play in the mud: Remember doing this? I do. It was wonderfully innocent, marvelously liberating, and incredibly fun. The experience was so fulfilling that I didn’t even mind being lectured when I came through the door, tracking the remnants of my adventure through the house. Where would the blind beggar be without saliva and mud? Still blind, still begging and failing to appreciate the freedom that goes with bathing in the pool of Siloam.

John translates Siloam as “sent.” Healing is incomplete until it morphs into action. It is one thing to recognize and lament a problem; it is another to incorporate Christ’s wisdom, to chart a way through it, to articulate a vision and to pursue it with energy, intelligence, imagination and love. Go where *you* are sent, and *I* will go with you, because I am satisfied that God is calling us to the same places (plural) and that by traveling together, there will be healing---personal and social healing---every step of the way.

Remember what Jesus says to the blind beggar at the beginning of the story: “We must work the works of God who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work.” Night is coming, and

we shall not fear (yea, though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death), because in Jesus Christ, God has experienced valleys, shadows and death. In Jesus Christ, God has played in saliva and mud—in all the earth’s life-giving resources---and through Jesus Christ, God sends us into the world, where our Lord and Savior watches and waits for us. Remember his words: “As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” Christ is in the world, especially the darkest parts of it. Now to the One who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.