

Fourth Sunday In Lent + March 26, 2017  
Atonement Lutheran Church, Beloit, WI  
John 9:1-42

Nancy Raabe, Pastor

Bill and I recently went over to UW-Whitewater to see a production by the American Shakespeare Company of Thornton Wilder's "Our Town," which many consider to be America's greatest play. In a sense there's not to it: Life in the small town of Grover's Corners is average, characters are average, the staging is minimalist. Wilder's own handwritten directions at the beginning of the play say, "No curtain. No scenery." And yet, "Our Town" captures the universal experience of being alive because it gives us a perfect, perfectly structured microcosm of the life cycle. Wilder is reminding the audience of how precious daily life is and invites each of us to see our own lives from this heightened perspective.

This story of the man born blind in John's Gospel is dramatic masterpiece in a similar way. It presents us with the story of how a man who had sat in darkness his entire life came to see the light, both physically and spiritually. What's so brilliant about its structure is that the saga of the blind man gradually gaining his sight, meaning his faith and his awareness of who Jesus is, is told right alongside the story of how those who *thought* they understood everything, the Pharisees, sank gradually into blindness and end up in total darkness—totally clueless, spiritual blindness.

The actual miracle of the man's sight restored is told quickly, because the real interest is in the interrogations and the process of how spiritual sight and spiritual blindness each gradually develop.

For his part, the former blind man says things that reveal a deepening knowledge of Jesus. At first all he says in response, to the neighbors' questions, is that the miracle was done by "the man they call Jesus." Then, under pressure by the Pharisees, he says that the man is a prophet. Near the end, he becomes a passionate defender of Jesus, affirming him as a man from God. And finally, in response to Jesus' own questioning, he acknowledges Jesus as the Son of God. "I do believe, Lord!"

At the same time that the former blind man is having his eyes opened to the truth about Jesus, the Pharisees and Jews are becoming more stubborn in their refusal to see the truth.

At first, they seem to accept the fact of the miraculous healing. Some are offended by the violation of the rules not to work on the Sabbath, but others are willing to be convinced and to hear the blind man speak for himself. But then Jews who are hostile take over, and doubt the fact of the miracle by questioning whether the man was ever blind. Then their interest in the truth completely disappears, and they try to trap the man by having him repeat the details of the miracle. They refuse to accept that Jesus could be from God. Then they rudely denounce the man and drive him out of the synagogue. And finally, the Pharisees who sat in judgment on the miracle—who believed they saw so clearly that they could render judgment on others—are judged guilty by Jesus and pronounced blind.

Because the Bible is a living book, this story and all the others aren't simply about what Jesus said to some people a long time ago. They're about us.

And we identify, don't we, with the formerly blind man, who has gained his sight. Surely, we are not to be considered blind, like the Pharisees! After all, we are people of faith. We come to church every week. We identify not only as Christians but as members of Atonement Lutheran Church. We confess our sins before God and receive words of forgiveness. We affirm our faith in the words of the

Creed. We shake our heads, either publicly or privately, at those who do not behave in what we consider to be a Christian way.

Ay! There's the rub. How quick we are to judge others! How eager we are to elevate ourselves above them, even though we'd never admit that to another person. Standing in judgement over others is one of the ways the devil tempts us to indulge in the sin of pride, the deadliest of the seven deadly sins. Judging others, talking down about them, is also known as gossip, which Paul lists in Romans Chapter 1 as a sin in the same breath as envy, strife, deceit, and murder.

Judging others is a form of spiritual blindness, because we are not seeing things as they really are but through our own lens, the lens of our own dysfunction and shortcomings. You may think that a certain person is a busybody, but in fact that behavior is a mask for their deep loneliness. You may think someone is arrogant and insensitive, but that behavior covers up that person's deep insecurities. You may think someone is rude, but they act that way because they have never experienced genuine love from another human being. This

It all has to do with how clearly we see. How do we interpret our own setbacks? What about the loss of a job—does that make us bitter toward our employer? The loss of a loved one—do we become bitter toward God? What about losing a promotion—does that make us resentful? What about someone cutting in line ahead of us—does that make us want to lash out and let them have it?

Jesus is calling us here to see through the eyes of faith—or, in the words of our reading from 1 Samuel, to “look on the heart,” as Samuel was able to look on David's heart and see the true person within, beyond outward appearances. This begins with our encounter with Jesus, just as it did for the blind man. But we don't get it all at once—it's a gradual process, just as it was for this man, a process that grows the better we get to know Jesus and the more we bear witness to him and what he has

done for us—just as this man did under the Pharisees’ grilling. How did Brooks say it? “Whether he’s a sinner or not, I do not know. One thing I do know: That I was blind before, and now I can see.” In fact, the man’s faith in Jesus grew in proportion to his need to combat the growing blindness of the Pharisees. In the same way, the more obstacles people put in our way to faith, the more setbacks we experience in life, the stronger our testimony is called to be.

If we lose our job, we can use that opportunity to develop new skills that will bring us new life. If we lose a loved one, we can come to know Jesus more intimately through our suffering, and then minister to others in similar circumstances.

If we lose an expected promotion, we can take a hard look at our work habits and try to improve them. If someone cuts in line ahead of us, why not take a deep breath and then say something that reaches out to them, such as “Don’t you just hate these long lines?”

In every instance in life we can try to see others with the eyes of Christ, as Jesus sees us—in perfect love, loving us just as we are, with a love that knows no bounds.

So we are not the formerly blind man; we are the Pharisees. But our advantage is that we have asked Jesus to lead us out of blindness.

As we sing the following hymn, I invite you to put yourself in their place and sing about our hope that God will find us, and that we will then be able see clearly with the eyes of faith.

Amen.

“One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.”

It's the word everyone uses when someone just told you something and you literally can't come up with anything else to respond with. So in essence you use "I see"

Also used when you hear something really nasty or something you just could have gone without hearing you commonly use the words "I see"

A good response when you have nothing better to say.

*"I broke my leg yesterday!"*

*"I see."*

A phrase used when someone says something that is not particularly interesting but you feel the need to respond anyway as not to be rude. Mostly used during instant messaging conversations.

*Person A: So I was watching an episode of How It's Made today, it was about toilet seats.*

*They make them in a factory with lasers, it's pretty cool. Anyway, after that I went to the plaza and had a wrap.*

*Person B: I see*

Phrase used when you have no idea what the other person has just said but definitely do NOT want them to clarify.

*Guy: We were at the TOC giving a briefback when the GC walked in...*

*Girl: I see...*