
Inching Our Way Toward Belief

A sermon by Canon Lauren Holder
Lent 4 – Year A
The Second Sunday of Social Distance

Today's Gospel is a snippet of one of my favorite stories of healing, wholeness and relationship. It is a story of a person transformed by their belief, but not in the way you might expect. The story in its entirety actually takes up all of chapter 9 and even part of chapter 10 in the Gospel of John. Here's a recap:

First, Jesus is walking along, minding his own business, when he sees a person who cannot see. Jesus sees a person many would not have seen during a time when difference was cause for distance.

Then Jesus spits on the ground, makes mud with his saliva and the dirt, and spreads the spit-mud on the man's eyes.

It's at this point that I have to wonder, what was going through the man's mind?! Did he even know Jesus was coming at him with some spit and dirt? He didn't ask to be healed in our text, so it's unclear what—if any—exchange Jesus and the man might have had prior to getting his eyes caked in mud.

As Jesus does his thing, he tells the man to go wash in a pool called Siloam. And for the folks wondering at home, Siloam means "sent." Jesus sent the man to the sending pool.

So the man washes in Siloam, and he's healed! He's healed in the sense that he can see, and yet we find that he's not yet restored to his community. Instead, folks are arguing about whether it's really him...

Some say, "It's him! The guy that used to beg us for food!"

But others insist, "No it's not. It's just some doppelganger."

Finally, the man pipes in: "It's me! I'm that guy!"

They ask, "But how can you see?"

He responds, "A guy named Jesus made mud, put it on my eyes, and told me to wash in Siloam. I went, I washed, and now I see!"

They ask, "Where is this Jesus?"

And he tells them, "I don't know..." Remember, the man wouldn't have even seen Jesus since he couldn't see until after leaving Jesus to wash in Siloam.

Well, that response didn't go over well. Instead of rejoicing with the man and saying, "Hey—that's great! What a gift! Tell us what it's like to be able to see for the first time?" Instead of celebrating someone being healed, they took the man to the authorities.

So then he is asked again: "How can you see?"

And he says again: "He put mud on my eyes, I washed, and now I see."

Then the authorities start arguing about who Jesus is.

Some say, "This man can't be from God—he's a sinner who doesn't even honor the sabbath."

But others insist, "You're wrong! Sinners can't heal people, and this man is healed!"

Not even the authorities could agree, so they turn again to the man and ask, "Well... he opened your eyes... what do you have to say about him?"

He responds: "He's a prophet."

Still not convinced, they bring in the man's parents for questioning: "Is this your son? Was he born blind? How can he see?"

Nervously, they deflect back to their son: "That's our son, and he can speak for himself."

So again, they go to the man, still missing the point that: HEY! This is something to celebrate! But fearful of change, fearful of what they cannot explain, they ask the man if Jesus is a sinner.

He responds: "I don't know if he is or he isn't. Here's what I know: I was blind, and now I see."

And again they ask, "HOW?!"

And again he responds, "I TOLD YOU HOW."

So they say, "But we can't figure out where this Jesus comes from..." which is another way of saying, "But we can't figure out if he's from God... we can't figure out if he's one of us... we can't figure out how we're supposed to feel about this."

And then the man, flabbergasted by their ongoing arguing, testifies: "He opened my eyes. God doesn't listen to sinners. God listens to those who obey him. If he weren't from God, I wouldn't be able to see, and we wouldn't be having this conversation."

Angry and maybe a little embarrassed, they send him away. Even after being healed, the man is still an outsider.

Jesus hears all that has gone down, and you know what he does? He goes looking for the man. And when he finds him, he asks, "Do you believe in the Son of God?"

The man responds: "Who is that?"

And Jesus says, "Me. It's me. The one speaking to you. I'm that guy."

So the man immediately begins to worship Jesus, saying, "Lord, I believe."

What a story, right?

Did you notice how the man's sight is only the beginning of his transformation?

It starts with his obeying Jesus. He washes himself and finds that he can see.

It continues as he's questioned again and again...

First he calls Jesus a man.

Then he calls Jesus a prophet.

Then he testifies that Jesus is from God.

Then he sees Jesus, believes Jesus, and calls Jesus, "Lord."

There's more than one transformation to this story!

And notice that it's not until the man sees Jesus and worships Jesus, that he at last finds community, relationship and wholeness. He might have thought that he would have found wholeness just in being able to see, but he actually finds it worshipping Jesus.

Now here's why this story struck me this week. Because I think a lot of us have experienced this kind of inching-our-way-to-belief that the man experienced in his healing.

Just last week, I knew we were going to have to make some changes—at home, here at the church, in our schools. I knew these changes were coming. And yet, I couldn't quite wrap my head around it.

A week ago, a parishioner emailed me to ask if our Women's Lenten Retreat would still be on—just two days later. Of course! But I woke up the next day and started asking myself, is this wise?

Part of me could totally talk myself into staying the course: we would be in a remote space, things weren't yet too unsafe, none of the participants had asked me to cancel it.

The other part of me was scared to go: scared that things would change so quickly while I was away and I'd be less able to care for my family, scared that I would be putting our parishioners at risk by continuing to meet. Finally, around noon, I called it off.

That night as I went on my usual walk through the neighborhood, I reflected back on the events of the day and how quickly things had changed. I was shocked that the decision I struggled to make just a few hours earlier now felt like a total no-brainer. I was inching my way along into belief. I was fighting the truth even as I was embracing it, until the truth was standing in front of me plain as day.

Sometimes coming to terms with the truth is like that. Sometimes we have to answer questions again and again and again, so that we can listen to what we're saying to others, and then realize what it is we believe.

Sometimes we have to realize that having all the answers isn't where we find wholeness. Which means not having all the answers is actually ok.

We find wholeness in community. We find wholeness in relationship. We find wholeness in worshipping the God who creates us, redeems us, and sustains us.

In this season of uncertainty, I pray that we would be gentle with ourselves, remembering that wholeness does not come from having all the answers.

I pray that we would give ourselves a break from all the breaking news, all the articles, all the strategies for homeschooling, all the pressure to produce at optimum speed with sub-optimal conditions, and all the great content people are putting out into the world. It's only useful if it connects us. It's only useful if it sustains our relationships. It's only useful if it helps us to integrate all the various parts of ourselves responding to the various demands of this season. It's only useful if it contributes to wholeness.

You might botch a meeting. You might miss a deadline. You might yell at your kids. You might put on 5lbs from stress eating. You might feel alone. You might cry. You might even get sick.

And when those things happen, remember that wholeness isn't in getting it all right—isn't in having all the answers. Remember that we find wholeness in relationship, and call a friend. Remember that we find wholeness in worshipping God, and start singing Amazing Grace.

Remember who you are and whose you are. Remember who we are together.

Amen.