

Perhaps some of you, listening to this story, found yourselves thinking that Jesus was not practicing good social distancing!

Putting his hands and his saliva on another person's face!

No! Do not try this at home.

But Jesus wasn't concerned about infectious disease – at least, not the kind researched in laboratories and treated by degreed physicians.

In fact, as we learn by the end of the story, Jesus wasn't even primarily concerned with the man's eyes.

Jesus was seeking to give the man inner vision – the vision of faith in the God who gives life.

Such vision is possible even for those who are – and remain – physically blind. We have only to consider such passionately faithful Christians as musician Ken Medema or the poet Fanny Crosby, who wrote the words to hymns such as Blessed Assurance, Pass me not o gentle Savior, and To god be the glory.

But Jesus does not demonstrate the kingdom of heaven come near in private ways, as personal favors.

He always does his signs so that the community might come to faith.

Like last week's story of the Samaritan woman at the well, today's story begins with a private encounter, but then the one is sent to the many – the woman to the villagers and the blind man to the pool of Siloam, which means sent, and then back to his neighbors, who brought the Pharisees, who brought his family.

But unlike last week's story, found in John 4:1-42, today's story does not have a happy end.

In that story, the woman's whole village of outcast Samaritans came to "see", that is, believe in Jesus because of his word.

But in today's story, the whole village or synagogue remained blind, refusing to believe Jesus' word and sign,

and the single "seeing" man, formerly blind, was cast out to follow Jesus.

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Where do we find ourselves in this story today?

In light of the COVID-19 virus, we may feel like the blind man at the beginning of the story, begging by the side of the road.

--daily we beg for information and updates about this virus

--daily we pray for the numbers to be reducing, for deaths to be decreasing,

--daily, we beg for protection for those who are giving care, who are on the front lines, and who are striving to maintain social distance.

--daily, we beg for an end to the isolation and loneliness

--daily we beg for an end to the hard work of adapting to a change we did not even have time to resist.

It is a novel coronavirus, we have heard over and over – it is something new and nobody except God knows the answer to the question of "how long?"

Jesus' disciples also asked a question to which only God knew the answer. "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

We might ask the question differently – "What caused this?" or "Why did this happen?" Or, more generally, "Why do bad things happen to good people?"

Jesus' answer assigns no blame whatsoever. Instead, he invites hearers to faith.

*"Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him"*

So often we try to fix bad situations by focusing on ourselves, as though we have control over all things.

Sure there are some things we can take action to improve, but many we cannot.

We cannot solve global warming by eating our vegetables;

we cannot cure cancer by recycling;

a new outfit and hairdo will not save a broken marriage.

The impulse to take control is the opposite of Jesus' invitation.

*Watch and see – God is going to take action in this blind man's life.*

With his own hands and word, Jesus gave physical sight to the blind man, named Bartimaeus in Mark's Gospel.

But that was just the beginning.

The unfolding of the man's testimony – for it was as if he were hauled into court to explain and defend this miracle – is what reveals the true purpose of this sign.

Namely, to distinguish between faith in God through Jesus and faith in one's own beliefs.

The turning point is this:

*Pharisees: We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, Jesus, we do not know where he comes from."*

*The healed man answered, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. 31 We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. 32 Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. 33 If this man were not from God, he could do nothing."*

Although the healed man did not yet have the fullness of faith in Jesus, he had the inner vision to know that God was the source of his healing.

The Pharisees, who thought themselves all-seeing and all-knowing when it came to religion, found themselves blinded by their unbelief.

It was more important to them that Jesus had broken the sabbath rules than that the man received his sight.

They were blind to the presence of the living God in Jesus.

The man came to complete faith, when Jesus told him he is the Son of Man.

- The Son of Man who raised the army of dry bones in the wilderness to life by God's command
- The Son of Man who is exalted to the throne of heaven
- The Son of Man who sees and does the will of God on earth as in heaven

*Jesus asks, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" 36 He answered, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him." 37 Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." 38 He said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped him.*

This is the invitation Jesus extends to each of us today – to see and trust that Jesus is the Savior sent by God to give life in our world – and to worship him and praise him and tell others what we see.

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This is easy when we are party to a miracle. But Jesus is present with us and active in our world even when he is not performing miracles.

Can we see even in this challenge of COVID-19 the ways God through Jesus is working to bring the inner sight of faith to people?

Let us take one further theological step to make this clearer—Jesus has given the Holy Spirit to people --- people like you and I.

Baptism is the physical means of this grace just as mud and saliva and a bath in the pool of Siloam was the blind man's physical means of grace from Jesus.

So let me ask the question again: Can we see even in this virus challenge the ways that God-- through Jesus people-- is working to bring the inner sight of faith to our world?

When you have finished worshiping with us today, I encourage you to make a comment where you can to share what you have seen of God at work.

Maybe on social media

Maybe by text

Maybe to a friend or family member

I, for one, have seen faith blossom in phone calls where people encourage each other and pray for one another.

We are discovering that we all can pray out loud, not just the pastor!

While we are staying home, washing our hands, drinking our water, and social distancing,

Like the formerly blind man, let us tell others what we see of God's saving grace and invite them to come and see Jesus.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen