

Homily for the Fourth Sunday of Lent

“As Jesus walks along ...”

Offered by Mary Ellen Sheehan, IHM
 IHM Chapel, Monroe, MI 22 March 2020
 Text: John 9:1-41 The Healing of a Blind Man

As we all know, the four Gospels each have distinctive characteristics. They were written in different cultural contexts as the message of Jesus moved throughout the Mediterranean world in the first centuries of the common era. Each one took shape from what the particular communities needed to hear as they struggled to grasp the significance of this radical message of Jesus. Thus, we followers today receive a very rich portrait of Jesus and his message, having the benefit of all four Gospels. And yet there is always even more to discover about Jesus as we followers today read and listen and allow the proclamation of the Word, the Incarnate Word, to transform us. We add to the story as members of the beloved community of God.

Today we are enriched by the unique literary characteristics of the Gospel of John, which has fewer miracles than the Synoptics and practically no parables, but instead long and intriguing narratives. Some are even dramas in which various characters engage in puzzling dialogues and punchlines that eventually lead to the dramatic turning point: that in fact there is a radically new way to “see” and to engage with our world. If the drama of the blind man that we contemplate today had been written in the 16th century, we would say it is Shakespearean!

So, let’s take a *look*, (pun intended!) at it anew today. The context is casual – Jesus is just walking along. But then he sees a beggar blind man whom, it seems, everyone knows was blind from birth and thus, according to beliefs of the time, was in a chain of inherited sin. And thus, Act I begins in which the disciples are the main characters. It becomes evident that they are in need of enlightenment – a word I choose deliberately for the contrast in the drama is with blindness. There is physical blindness, yes, in the blind man; but even more significant is the blindness in the disciples *who do not yet see* that it is necessary to get beyond inherited beliefs that exclude people – in this case, the son and his parents. The disciples need to gain *real* sight, insight, that is, into the liberating wholeness that Jesus preaches. *Salva*, in the word *salvation*, after all, means healing, wholeness. Yes, Jesus saves, but this means restoring our sight to “see *deeply*,” to experience wholeness, to “see as God sees ...,” as the Samuel reading proclaims today.

But then we move into Act II, which engages us in the encounter of the newly sighted man with the Pharisees who have a bunch of questions for him. Of course they do! They are teachers, after all, and their style is to engage by the question-answer-question, etc. technique. They were the teachers of the Law and, not unlike our church and synagogue and mosque teachers today, some of them interpreted the seeing man’s responses very strictly while others brought forth strands in the Law that could lead to

new interpretations, generating *insight* about living even more faithfully through the wider inclusion of people into the community of God's beloved.

Next comes Act III and it is a tough one. The drama is heightened when the Pharisees turn to the man's parents for answers to the questions. The parents choose to withhold how their son was healed because they fear the power of these authorities to exclude them from the synagogue, which meant, in fact, excluding them from the community.

Enter again the son, so full of Light now, who testifies fulsomely and fearlessly that Jesus is *a Prophet, the One from God, the Son of Man, the One who sees and listens and teaches and heals and loves*. But the strict Pharisees prevail in the scene and exclude the man from the synagogue because he has the *nerve* to try to teach *them* something more about interpreting the Law! What a horrible burden for his parents! I have often wondered if they kept going to the synagogue or if they left it to be in solidarity with their son.

The Gospel writer employs paradox here. Who are really the blind ones and who are those in the Light? The concluding act resolves it. Jesus says: "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do *not* see may see, and those who *do* see may become blind." The Law in other words is not without norms; Jesus makes a judgment. But in so doing, he lifts up levels of the Law that contain deeper and wider values to direct us on how to act.

All of us, I suspect, need to be "shaken up" from time to time in the way we see our Earth home and its people, our church laws and our government laws. We have it in us, I think, to be at times the eager but yet still learning disciples who don't quite get it yet. At other times we are the Pharisees who assume they know it all and are truly the just ones. Again, we are like the parents who, for fear of exclusion, need strength and courage to be in solidarity with their son. Then again, at times we are the son, whose surprise and gratitude leads him even deeper into surrendering, life-giving faith and tremendous strength for public witness.

There are some very narrow interpretations of the Law occurring today in our Church and in our political and economic and social global life today. I suspect Jesus and the writer of John's Gospel would indeed have something to say to us today when these interpretations exclude people who are "different" or poor or sick or on the streets or struggling to pay their bills and feed their children. Let us see if we can figure out ourselves what they would say to us. After all, we are *already* in the Light and Life and Love of Jesus, our Incarnate Word. We already have the light to *see*, to *judge*, and to *act*, to give public witness to the way Christ sees. As Gerard Manley Hopkins might put it, our eyes after all are already "Christed!"

-Mary Ellen Sheehan, IHM