

Open Eyes for Open Lives

a sermon based on

Ephesians 5:8-14 & John 9:1-41

and delivered on

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5th Sunday in Lent (Year A)

for

Cherry Valley United Methodist Church

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The sermon that I started on Monday and which I thought I had pretty well fleshed out on Tuesday, that's gone. Bits and pieces remain. However, the on-going developments of the past week meant that it had to change.

Even when our bishop sent out an e-mail on Monday saying she thought it was time to suspend in person worship. I didn't want to hear that. I even sought some clarification – “She thinks it's time,” is that merely a recommendation? I knew better. It was a recommendation in the sense of when your mom said that she thought it was time to clean your room or take out the trash.

But, I did not want to hear that, especially for Sunday worship. You heard me say it in the announcements earlier that worship is something we do – not something that we watch. I didn't and I don't want to put on another show to watch on Sunday morning. {aside: At least I don't have to worry about getting you out in time to get to lunch or your grandkids' softball games}

So we're here: metaphorically but spiritually united through our life in Jesus Christ who knew all about suffering. He knew grief when his friend Lazarus died. He knew humiliation when those Roman soldiers put that crown of thorns on his head and mocked him. He knew pain when they pounded the nails into his hands and feet. He even knew death – that which none of us has yet experienced.

But in all that, he knew the power of God the Father Almighty. In all that, he knew and showed just how much God values every single person: whether it be the poorest waif or the richest billionaire, the most pompous and the most humble, the most righteous and the most degenerate. In each of these – in each of us – who are made in the image of God dwells (no matter how masked it is by coughing and congestion) the breath of God which gives us life.

When we walk through the darkest valley, we need not be overcome by fear, for he is with us. Especially now, it seems that each day brings more news to stoke our fears. That fear is more contagious and virulent than any virus.

A week ago Friday, Susan told me to (I'd say, “asked me to,” but let's face it when your wife “asks” it's the same as when your mom or bishop “asks.”) ... so she sent me to do the shopping. We were having a houseguest. I've given up TV and surfing the internet for Lent (generally it's made me much happier), so Susan warned me that I might experience some craziness at the store. Apparently, there had been a run on toilet paper: people were hoarding it. I told her to quit looking at Facebook for news.

When I got to Walmart, though, not only was the toilet paper all gone, but the bottled water aisle was empty. What are people thinking? Do they think the taps will suddenly quit working? They do know that diarrhea is not a symptom of coronavirus. Right?

Then Thursday, as I sat waiting for my truck to be serviced, another customer told me (we were six feet apart) that he'd heard that gun stores were out of 9mm ammunition. Do we now think that covid-19 will bring about the zombie apocalypse?

At Aldi later as I was putting the one box of tissues that I was allowed into my cart, a woman with a sigh of relief took the last package of toilet paper from the shelf. “We're out,” she said. We talked in the aisle about the silliness and the senselessness of the supplies that people are hoarding (Again, we kept our six foot distance.) I joked that I feel a little bit guilty, because we have such a surplus. Having noticed only one spare roll in the bathroom a few weeks ago, I bought a Costco sized package, only to have Susan tell me that we already had another stored in the laundry room.

Maybe that's why people are hoarding ammunition: they have to defend their stockpiles of toilet paper and bottled water.

Do we have patience and confidence that normalcy will return? Do we have confidence that someday – hopefully in the not too distant future – that we'll once again have our pick of brand

and package size? Logic says, “Yes,” but fear often overrides that portion of our brains. It blinds us to hope.

Not everyone who hoarded supplies did so because they were afraid of the coronavirus, instead they were afraid that those already hoarding would deny them what they need. Difficult times – dark times – can bring out the best or the worst in us. Fear – not logical caution – but fear is destructive.

In that passage from Ephesians earlier, Paul encourages us to “Take no part in the unfruitful works of the darkness, but instead to expose them.” He continues, “For it is shameful even to mention what people do secretly.” (Eph 5:11-12 NRSV) Even though he’s talking about depravity, I think there is a word in here for us. We have this capacity for thinking that what we do and who we are in secret – stays secret. That’s been going on long before we were told that “What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas.” It doesn’t.

When I say it doesn’t, I’m not just talking about others finding out, but it distorts our perception of who we are. Before I turn to the story of Jesus and the blind man in the Gospel, let’s play a game. Shall we?

Peek-a-boo. When I put my hand in front of my face, did you wonder where I’d gone? Have you ever played that game with a baby, though? Have you ever witnessed the dread on some of them when those hands cover a face? The glee when they see you again? They don’t yet know, what we’ve learned, that just because we can’t see it right now, that we’re not alone.

My grandson, Aaron, plays a game. He’ll be three-years-old in a couple of months. In the game he closes his eyes (he’s really squinting but I pretend not to notice), he gropes to find me as I say, “Where’s Aaron?” They live in Kansas City, so it’s been awhile since I’ve seen him in person: I don’t know if he still thinks that when his eyes are closed – that when he can’t see – that he is invisible.

Maybe we have to look for the connection, but let’s consider the blind man in the Gospel today. The disciples ask what everyone else thinks, “Who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?” (Jn 9:1b NRSV) We know better than that. Right? Do we? There’s something troubling about that question. There’s even something troubling about Jesus’ answer.

What does he say? “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.” (Jn 9:10a NRSV) Does that bother you, too? But let’s think about it differently.

This blind man – this man who couldn’t see – this man who could never see – he was invisible. He might have even felt invisible himself. When people saw him - a son of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – they did not see a man made in the image of God. They didn’t see him: they saw sin.

But that’s not what Jesus saw. Is it? Jesus looked at him, and said, “Hey brother, here’s mud in your eye.” {Aside: That sort of connects to the 200 proof love that we talked about last week in church} Jesus said, “I see YOU. I see one whose very life springs from the Spirit; even if no one else will and even if you don’t see it yourself.”

What did he get: Jesus not the man born blind? He got criticized: not just criticized but defamed as a sinner. Why? Because he didn’t follow the rules exactly, that’s why. He refused to wait a day until it was “proper” to reveal this man to the world.

The leaders (and probably most everyone else) didn’t like it. They continued to ignore him, turning to his parents and asking them. I like that they said, “Talk to him yourself. You can see him. You’ve always been able to see him.”

So it is with us. I found myself getting angry this week. I was angry to give up in person worship. I was angry when the governor put waiters and waitresses out of work. I was angry when the libraries and state parks were closed (I still don't see the logic in closing hiking trails.). I was angry with the shelter in place order. However, as Andrew Lester says in his book, *The Angry Christian*, anger is actually a physiological response within the amygdala. Anger is the emotional expression of fear.¹

So why was I angry? I was angry that a couple of billionaires, because "lives matter more than livelihood," made decisions that were going to hurt the most vulnerable. Waiters and waitresses depend on tips. Even as much as their employers try to keep them busy, their hours will be cut or eliminated, and unemployment insurance only provides cents on the dollar to the minimum wage that is their only guaranteed income.

I was angry that small mom and pop restaurants that aren't set up for take-out – will be out of business for two weeks. What happens to deliveries they received last Friday? Food is perishable.

I was angry that theater and retail employees, low wage workers, won't be able to work. On a personal level – maybe this is where the fear factor works in – a substitute teacher, Susan can't work. Even though she's worked most school days this year, she's not a school employee. No benefits for her.

More than this I was angry that all of a sudden we need to react to one particular virus. I don't mean to be dismissive here, but a virus that has led to less than a thousand deaths so far in our country, when the CDC estimates that 23,000 have already died due to the common flu.² Don't we care enough about them? What about them?

Why is it that we only react when a new virus emerges: whether it be SAR, MERS, or COVID-19? Although it's been banished from our shores, polio continues to disable children in Afghanistan.

I'm angry that I have so much access to food that I'm fat, while nearly 795 million people in the world don't even have enough food.³

Why do we react when a gunman shoots a dozen people in a night club or a church, when nearly half a million women are beaten each week?! Many of them for a final time.

My anger – my fear, I think, comes from the blindness that comes with so much that we ignore day to day. And that those things will continue to be ignored.

This is an opportunity. Maybe I did this a bit, but we can't just ignore coronavirus and expect it to go away. However, except for the six foot and avoid crowds rule, we're told that to prevent the spread of coronavirus we should wash our hands, stay home if we have a fever, and to be mindful. Right? These are things we should be doing all the time.

We can't just get upset that people who are just scraping by now lack even a scraper. Instead, we need to open our eyes to see them and to realize that maybe there's something to be done to assure that no one should have to merely scrape by. With Jesus we can say, "Here's mud in your eye. You are far more valuable than even you imagine."

Maybe this is a time, when as we find ourselves unable to visit others, we can remember that the lonely widow or widower was lonely before this week. With Jesus, we can say to her, "Here's mud in your eye. I see you, now. I'm sorry."

¹ Andrew D. Lester, *The Angry Christian: A Theology for Care and Counseling*, 1st ed (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003) 55-56.

² <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/weekly/index.htm> (Accessed March 18, 2020)

³ <https://www.foodaidfoundation.org/world-hunger-statistics.html> (Accessed March 22, 2020)

Maybe this is a time, when we consider the existential threat born by something so small that it is invisible, that we can refuse to look past the incivility that makes violence an “acceptable” outlet for one’s own angst.

On a simple level, maybe this is a time when we can look at those closest to us and share a roll of toilet paper or a bottle of water. I don’t really want to think about all the connotations of “sharing” ammunition.

Here’s the good news. Jesus doesn’t say it’s because you’re a sinner that he wants you to see. That’s not what he’s looking at. He sees in you – in each of us – I think even the holiest among us – he sees something more precious than any of us can really imagine. Here’s the good news. For all that intimidates us about covid-19 and the other problems in the world, Jesus says that we’re up for it, not by looking at the problems and blaming the sin, but by having our eyes opened to the treasure that is one another and lifting it up. AMEN.