

**The Rev. Victoria Kirk Mouradian
Sermon for All Saints by-the-Sea
Sunday, March 30, 2014**

Readings: Fourth Sunday in Lent, Year A - 1 Samuel 16:1-13; Ephesians 5:8-14; John 9:1-41.

On this 4th Sunday in Lent, we are past the halfway point of our Lenten spiritual exercise. How's it going? Have you been able to focus inwardly? Identify ways you could strengthen your personal relationship with God? Have you been able to keep up with your Lenten commitment to abstain from something, or perhaps add something, to remind you that this is a time to grow spiritually? Or if you haven't succeeded, are you beginning to think that Ash Wednesday and New Year's Day have too much in common? Days in which you are inspired to make meaningful resolutions which start off with a bang but go out with a whimper in a matter of days or weeks? If you've fallen off the Lenten Wagon, don't despair. Your spirituality has not been snuffed out. Lent is not supposed to mirror unkind diet mentality...you know the one that tells you that since you blew it for one day the whole diet is blown. You're here, aren't you? You felt inspired to come and that is so important...for within worship we can find the inspiration to start afresh. Think baptism. Think resurrection. God would want you to take heart, pick up your Lenten pieces, and run with them.

We heard a wonderful story this morning that can help revitalize our Lenten journey. In the Gospel of John, we heard that Jesus healed a man blind since birth. The Pharisees were unwilling to accept that the healing power of Jesus could be from God, because they considered Jesus a sinner. After all, he didn't follow all the rules and regulations handed down through their religious tradition. He did contrary things, like heal on the Sabbath or eat with sinners and tax

collectors. The grateful man, who was no longer blind, was astonished at their attitude. He challenged them by saying, *“You do not know where he comes from and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.”* The Pharisees promptly drove the man out of the synagogue.

There are many wonderful points to this story that I could point out for reflection. Because it is lent and a time when we are directed inward, I want to draw your attention not so much to the miracle that Jesus performed, but to the reaction of the Pharisees. How do we grow closer to God when we are blinded to his larger picture?

The Pharisees were a party that developed over time from the ranks of scribes. The **Sadducees** were a party that developed over time from the ranks of priests. After the Babylonian captivity of the Israelites and their subsequent exile, scribes and priests determined the inner development and life of Israel after they returned to their land. The characteristic feature of the Pharisees was their legal tendency, and for the Sadducees, it was their social position. During the time of the Greek Empire, or Hellenistic period, the chief priests (the Sadducees) and rulers of the people of Israel began to interpret the law, which had been handed down by Moses, and interpreted for everyday life. These laws had been interpreted into such things as purity codes and dietary laws...pages of them. During this period, the Pharisees united themselves more closely into an association that made it a duty to follow the letter of the law. After the exile to Babylon, the underlying thought was that if the laws had been followed strictly,

the Israelites would never have been held captive. As governments came and went, the consistent religious principles of the Pharisees held together Israel as a nation within a nation. Under Roman rule, the Pharisees maintained their spiritual authority and had the bulk of their nation as their ally. Their influence far exceeded that of the Sadducean high priests and all acts of public worship, prayers, and sacrifices were performed according to their injunctions. In essence, they held sway over the masses. It was this background that Jesus was born into.

It is easy to talk about the Pharisees as a group. In fact, it is always easy to talk about any “group”....just use bold sweeping terms to describe what characteristics are held in common. For the Pharisees, I think the overwhelming thing we think of is legalism. Most of us are only familiar with the Pharisees by way of the gospel stories. It is very difficult to put an individual face on any member of this group. The word *legalism* strikes a negative cord...unyielding, uncompassionate. But, what were the Pharisees like as individuals? Were they uncompassionate about everything? What made up their day to day life with work and family? Did their adherence to the law make them unloving? Doubtful. What were their hopes and dreams? What sorrows or burdens did they carry? As a group, they had a history of living under occupation, but the Israelites were supposed to be God's chosen people, a light to the nations. If that was the case, then how did they lose their promised land? Was it their collective sin of disobedience to God that brought them down? If that was the case, then as a people, the Pharisees felt that the Israelites needed to shape up. If they could just do everything perfectly in God's eyes then surely they would be delivered from their circumstances. God had given them the law. The Pharisees thought that interpreting it correctly and following it exactly held the answer. Did they love the

law more than God? Maybe some Pharisees did...but perhaps the Pharisees thought that obeying the law was **the only way** to love God.

When Jesus healed the man born blind, the Pharisees were caught off guard by this miraculous event. It wasn't the manner by which the man had been healed which unnerved them. In the ancient world saliva was thought to have medicinal effects and was commonly used. Mud, earth, dirt, the other component of Jesus' poultice was God's initial element in creating man. Water was believed to be the great purifier so washing was a natural act. The unnerving part of the incident was that the Pharisees thought that Jesus was a sinner and therefore his acts were not from God. Their existence was to serve God through the law scrupulously. If anyone would be able to identify a prophet or a teacher, much less the Messiah, they would. When the Israelites had failed to obey God in the past, they had lost their land and their people had been held in captivity. Surely God would not overlook their diligent observance. They had held onto the letter of the law for so long that they could not tolerate disruption to their tradition. In their own way, they had put God in to a box, making the Creator predictable. As we have learned, God doesn't work that way.

What can we learn from the Pharisees' reaction to the man who regained his sight? When faced with what they didn't understand, they banished it from their presence. In this case, the healed man was driven out of the synagogue...as if that would make the healing incident go away. Probably fear drove them not to see the beauty of the miracle; fear of change. They held their religious tradition dear and that was a good thing, but in clinging to it too tightly they left

little room for the spirit of God to revitalize it. They were blind to God's work through Jesus. Do we do that?

We can learn so much about ourselves if we pay attention to this gospel story. It screams at us to look deep within our hearts. Do we tend to fall victim to the same trap as the Pharisees? Are we legalistic and thereby miss opportunities for growth and compassion? Are we governed by fear of the unfamiliar? Judge others by race, ethnicity, wealth, or intelligence? Does substance or appearance guide our hearts? Do we think that only our personal interpretation of morals and values suffice? Do we think that we own scripture or that only our denomination holds the answers? Do we put God in a box?

During a Lenten study on Christian values a few years back, I shared with the participating parishioners that I had been adopted as an infant in the “good girl/bad girl” era of the 50's. There was always great shame attached to unwed mothers, and babies born to them were in some way tainted by that shame. Although my parents loved me dearly, they were never able to be completely comfortable with the fact that I was from a shameful background, born out of wedlock, and unfortunately it surfaced. They even went so far as to leave me a letter, which I found after their deaths, saying that my father had died in a plane crash. What they didn't expect me to find out was the truth, which I had. The unspoken nature of my birth created a subtle tension that ran through our life together. Like the man born blind, I was somehow tainted by the sins of my biological parents. Over time I refused to give in to that stigma and felt called in ministry to make room for all peoples within the Church. Jesus Christ has always been the great equalizer for me.

When my children were in youth group, they visited The Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles. A year later, in a membership appeal, my daughter received along with her invitation a little picture of Abraham Beem, an adorable nine year old boy, with a subtle smile on his face and Harry Potter type glasses atop his nose. I wanted to hug him immediately but of course I couldn't. Abraham had been killed upon his arrival at Auschwitz in 1944, a year before World War II ended. For years we kept Abraham's picture on our refrigerator. We glanced at his adorable face, constantly reminded what Christian love and tolerance should be all about.

So, if you find yourself lagging behind in your Lenten resolutions, take this morning's gospel story to heart. It's a great way to begin anew. Reflect on it. What fears can you let go of to draw closer to God? Learn from the Pharisees. They developed a beautiful and meaningful way to live out God's laws. They simply didn't know when enough was enough. What is too much for you? What is it about yourself that clouds your vision of God's greater picture? What thoughts or opinions compel you to place God in a box? What holds you back from allowing God a closer place in your heart? Pick up your Lenten pieces and run with them. God wants to hold you close. Find an Abraham to place in plain sight and I pray that all of us may continue on our Lenten way.

Amen.