

**Sermon for Sunday, March 26, 2017**  
**St James Episcopal Church, St James NY**  
**The Very Rev. Canon Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley**

It's an unusual story, this Sunday's gospel.  
And do you notice what's different  
from many of the other times  
when Jesus heals someone?

Usually what happens  
is that someone calls out to Jesus for help,  
or reaches out and touches him,  
or comes to plead with him.  
And usually they make some great  
profession of faith.

But this time, there's none of that.  
This time, the blind man  
was just sitting, minding his own business,  
when Jesus happened to walk by.  
As far as we can tell, the blind man  
was oblivious to Jesus' presence,  
and Jesus didn't seem  
to have noticed him either.

It hadn't been a good day for Jesus, the way the gospel according to John tells the story.

After last week, when Jesus left Jerusalem after throwing the tables over in the temple,  
and met the woman at the well  
outside the Samaritan town of Sychar,  
Jesus had gone back north to Galilee,  
back where he had grown up.  
There he was welcomed.  
A royal official called and asked him  
to help his little boy, who was close to death,  
and Jesus came, and healed him,  
and the little boy lived,  
and the road official and his whole household  
believed in him.

But the months passed  
and it was time for all observant Jews  
to go up to the temple again,  
to celebrate one of the major festivals.  
And so Jesus set off with his disciples  
and while he was in Jerusalem,  
he got himself in trouble again,  
this time for healing someone on the sabbath,  
and again he retreated to Galilee,  
where he fed the huge crowds  
that came to hear him preach.  
Five loaves of bread, two fish,  
and no one went hungry.

But now it was his supporters who were the troublemakers,  
wanting to upend the government and make Jesus king.  
Even though just down the road, that royal official  
still believed in him.

And so Jesus retreated, they say, though it was more like  
he went into hiding.  
But eventually they found him  
and clamored for more miracles, more signs.  
But he responded with teaching, teaching about  
the bread of life,  
and it was too hard, they said, and they left,  
until it was just his twelve closest friends  
and a few others.  
And he continued to travel around Galilee,  
some believing, some saying  
that it was all too hard.

Until it came time for another holy festival  
back in Jerusalem,  
and this time it was his brothers - who weren't entirely convinced  
that he was  
who he said he was; they'd known him as a pesky little boy  
and remembered the time  
he'd stayed behind in Jerusalem without telling his parents,  
and they'd been in trouble

for not knowing where he was -  
his brothers goaded him,  
“Come with us to Jerusalem.  
After all, if you really are  
who you say you are,  
don’t your followers down south  
deserve  
to see you as well?”

“No,” he said,  
and they headed off.  
But Jesus wanted  
to be there for the festival,  
and so he gathered his closest disciples,  
the twelve,  
and travelled south incognito.  
Back to Jerusalem,  
where by the middle of the festival  
he was back in the temple courtyard  
teaching again  
surrounded by people  
hanging off  
his every word,  
and by the end of the celebrations,  
the religious leaders  
wanted to arrest him,  
and the people listening  
formed a human barricade,  
and the temple police  
got caught in the middle.

Eventually the sun went down,  
and the stone surfaces  
that had warmed during the day  
became cold and hard,  
and people began to drift away,  
and Jesus and his friends  
headed out of the city gates  
and stayed in a nearby village.  
But as the early morning sun washed the temple gold

there he was again,  
a group of people gathered around once more.

And the religious leaders  
played with him,  
trying to get him  
to say something or do something  
that would either provide evidence  
that they could use to arrest him  
or say something that would disturb those listening so much  
that they would abandon him.

In the end what he said  
was both less  
and more  
than they had hoped.  
What he said was,  
“Before Abraham was, I am.”  
Which in Hebrew  
is something very close  
to the unspoken name  
of God.  
Blasphemy.

On a day which had begun  
with him stopping the crowds  
from stoning a woman,  
he himself  
was in danger of being stoned.

But he slipped away,  
probably out the south gate of the temple,  
past the ritual baths and toward  
the oldest part of the city,  
the part that King David had founded,  
and it was there that his disciples noticed the blind man.

“See that man over there? Why is he blind? Whose fault was it?”

And Jesus looked where they were pointing,

and saw the man sitting there, a bowl in front of him  
to collect coins  
that generous pedestrians  
threw his way,  
and you can almost hear him saying, “Whaaaaat?  
Haven’t you heard anything  
that I’m saying?  
This man isn’t a theological issue to be discussed?  
He’s a human being!”

And Jesus turned towards the blind man,  
saying almost as an afterthought,  
“It’s no one’s fault. But God will be revealed in him.  
And I am the light of the world.”  
And with that cryptic response,  
he bent over  
and made mud from saliva and the dust on the ground,  
and wiped it on the man’s eyes.  
And you wonder if anyone remembered the story  
when God made humanity from the dust of the earth and the breath of his mouth,  
creation,  
and now re-creation.

And Jesus told the man  
to go wash in a nearby pool,  
and he got up  
and tapped his way over to the water,  
and bent over and cupped his hand  
and rinsed the mud from his eyes,  
and stood up  
eyes wide open  
staring at the light.

And when he came back  
to get his begging bowl,  
now striding confidently and smiling broadly,  
you could hear the voices,  
“Isn’t he that one...”

“Yes,” he said, “yes, I am.

I used to be blind, but this man, Jesus,  
he put mud on my eyes and told me to wash,  
and I did, and now I can see!”

”Which man?”

they asked.

“Jesus,” he answered.

“So where is he?”

“I don’t know. I never saw him.”

And then the religious leaders got involved,  
and brought up the same old complaint. If this man were from God  
he wouldn’t have healed on the sabbath.

“So who is he?” they asked the blind man.

“He’s a prophet.”

The leaders weren’t satisfied.

And so they asked his parents,  
who told them to ask their son,  
and so they asked him again.

“Who is this man?”

“He must be from God.” answered the blind man, answering their previous question.

“Go away.” they said. “You don’t know anything.”

And the blind man left, and eventually  
he ran into Jesus.

And Jesus asked him  
basically

the same question.

“Now that you’ve met me,  
and you’ve heard them,  
who do you think I am?”

And the blind man’s response,  
having spoken with Jesus,  
and his neighbors,

and the Jewish leaders,  
and it seems his parents,  
and the leaders again,  
and finally Jesus,  
his response is,  
'Lord, I believe.'

So often the way  
that people come to faith in Jesus  
is presented as one  
dramatic  
leap of faith.  
And that certainly happens.

But here, it's much more gradual, more tentative.  
The blind man  
goes from Jesus as a kind man,  
to Jesus as healer,  
to Jesus as prophet,  
to Jesus as Lord.

It doesn't happen  
instantaneously.

And in fact  
that seems to be the pattern in the gospel according to St John.  
There was Nicodemus, coming secretly to ask questions,  
afraid to be publicly associated with Jesus,  
and then a little later,  
kind of wavering from the party line of the Jewish leaders,  
and finally  
helping to bury him.  
And although he isn't mentioned in the bible after the resurrection,  
tradition has it  
that Nicodemus eventually did come to believe and was baptized.

And then there's Thomas  
the disciple who travelled around with Jesus for three years,  
and still, after his resurrection,  
found it hard to believe

until he saw the risen Christ  
with his own eyes.

There were Jesus' brothers,  
who were pretty much antagonistic to him  
before this visit to Jerusalem,  
but later became leaders in the church.

And the disciples as a whole.  
By the time of the resurrection  
most of them seem to have their faith  
pretty much together,  
though Peter  
famously wavered  
when confronted about his connections with Jesus  
as he waited outside by the fire  
while Jesus was being tried.

But they weren't too enthusiastic  
when Jesus was talking with the woman at the well,  
and they're pretty convinced that he won't be able to feed the five thousand,  
and they panic when they see him walking on the water,  
and they struggle with his teaching.  
And it's pretty clear  
that when they try to use the blind man as an object lesson  
they have really  
missed the point.

It takes three years  
full time with Jesus  
for the disciples  
to get what he's on about,  
it takes three years for them  
to come to believe.

Sometimes we think of faith  
as if it's all or nothing,  
something we either have  
or don't have.  
And that can be dangerous.

It can be dangerous  
because if we doubt, we wonder if we have faith at all.  
And it can be dangerous  
because if we believe, we're tempted to think  
we've got it all,  
and we close our mind to our faith growing and changing.

But the story of the blind man,  
and the story of scripture as a whole,  
is that Christ is always calling us on  
to new and deeper faith.  
It rarely happens  
in an instant,  
and often happens not because of some dramatic encounter with God  
but in conversations  
with those around us.

One of the things I have loved about our Lenten reflections this year  
is how much it encourages me in my faith in Christ  
to read what you all have written.  
We need one another.

And so I invite you  
these last couple of weeks in Lent  
to take the opportunity  
to talk about your faith  
with one another.  
Discuss the sermon  
or the readings.  
Come to bible study.  
Read the Lenten meditations.  
Pray for one another.  
And invite God  
to deepen  
your faith.