

We've been paying attention lately to the dialogue in the gospel of John, Jesus' dialogue with Nicodemus, in the dark of night, which apparently went nowhere, changing no one in the moment, but which, spinning out over a long period of time to bring Nicodemus to kneel before Jesus' body with oil in his hand, before his burial, to the dialogue Jesus had with the woman at the well, in the bright light of the day, which went everywhere, transforming her life in the moment, and spinning out in discipleship, drawing the most unlikely village into following Jesus, and to the conversation this morning between Jesus and the Pharisees, which appears to go nowhere, for the Pharisees aren't changed by the end of the encounter, but which spins out to completely transform the life of the man born blind, in a negative way, (he's cast out of the village) and in a positive way (he follows Jesus). Dialogue is the way we encounter Christ, the way we are changed, the way we are brought into the light, the way we bring others into the light.

The Jewish tradition has always allowed for and seen the value of active dialogue representing differing points of view. Chewing on a debated idea or practice, thinking hard together, wrestling the truth out of a heated conversation has always been seen as a way to keep oneself clear on how to live faithfully. So, the dialogues, the unsettling conversations which Jesus has been having lately are something to pay attention to, for we know truth will emerge, light will shine, and lives will be changed.

There are two important Jewish rituals which are the focus in today's dialogue: the observance of the Sabbath, or Shabbat, and generational sinfulness. What is important to notice in this dialogue is that Jesus leans into the conversation in both of these spots and invites a deeper meaning, a more faithful response, and a more profound act of obedience to God.

We began our service today by saying, "Amen. Lord have mercy" in response to the commandment, "Remember the Sabbath Day and keep it holy." We gather from our text this morning that the Pharisees took this commandment to mean a prohibition against doing anything by pray and worship God on their Sabbath day, although the Jews at that time actually had a much broader understanding of the Sabbath. Their observance was seen as a way to engage with the truth of creation, to reconnect them to God's purpose for them, something that was more than the act of plodding along through the mundane activities of human life, slogging through the week, only to begin it again, with never a break. The intentional slowing of their lives, turning their hearts toward God through prayer, was seen as a way to honor the God who gave them life. It is often said that the Jews didn't keep Sabbath, Sabbath kept the Jews: kept them close to their creator God. But in our story today, Jesus invites the Pharisees to lean deeper into the meaning of the Sabbath, go behind the shift in your daily routine, and obey God more fully, by seeing the Sabbath as the best time to do God's holy work, which always involves healing. This is not a time to rest, nor a time to withdrawal. This is not about giving things up, but entering into God's work more fully. We can make the parallel to our season of Lent. Pope Francis said at the beginning of Lent, "give something up only if it helps other people". I think that's exactly right. Lent is about giving something up, stripping obstacles away, rolling aside

the stones in our hearts and souls that prevent us from doing God's holy work. This is what obedience to God is all about. This is the truth Jesus wanted the Pharisees to hear in his dialogue.

The second part of the dialogue is around sinfulness. Jesus wanted to break apart the idea that sinfulness caused physical impairment and that sinfulness could be something passed on through the generations. This idea that the sinfulness of ourselves or our parents could cause injury or disability may sound silly to us, but this notion still shows up in our thoughts. It's just rephrased as "What did I do to deserve this?" One of the most difficult conversations I ever had was with a man at the parish I served last, whose son was stalked and murdered at Johns Hopkins University years before. He sat in my office, his head buried in his hands, his body collapsed in tears, wondering aloud, what had he, or the generations before him, done, that this would happen to their son. Jesus invites the Pharisees to lean into a deeper meaning, respond with a fuller obedience, by seeing the need for healing as an occasion for God to show up. Who or what caused the need for healing doesn't matter. God being a part of it is what matters and that's where the light comes in that can cast away the darkness.

I think it is certainly true that our world is facing issues today that fit no easy mold of precedent nor for which current ways of thinking can inform an answer and so we are called to engage in dialogue, listen more deeply to God, to lean more fully into obedience, so that the light might shine around us. Jesus calls us to do God's holy work each day of our lives, to travel beyond the current perceptions of our societies, to break away from blaming or from inflicting shame on those who need to be healed, and to bring the light of Christ into these situations. This is what we're called to do as the church and as members of the Body of Christ. Just as Jesus engaged in this dialogue, healed this man born blind, while he walked along, this peripatetic Christ was keenly aware of his surroundings and was constantly vigilant to discovery of teachable moments, we too must move as Christ does, paying full attention to every detail, always ready to listen and learn, attentive to the Spirit's movement, so that we too can bring the light of Christ into these broken situations.

The part of the healing that was transformational for the man born blind was not just that he could now see, but that he could now see Jesus. Just imagine this. Here was a man who throughout these many years could not distinguish between the cool gray-blue of the Sea of Galilee and the fiery red of the flames which cooked his meals, who gathered with the other blind people outside the city gate, laid out his cloak awaiting the sound of coins falling with a thud upon the cloth, and now, after all these years, he sees things around him for the first time, and it is Jesus who he sees first with these new eyes. It makes me wonder about when each of us first "saw" Jesus, the moment when our eyes were opened to who Jesus is, and when we began to take his identity upon ourselves. One could truthfully say that this is what happens in our baptism, and I see that look of recognition many times during that sacrament, but it is wise to ask the question, "Where is it now, in your daily life, that you see Jesus with newly opened eyes." Often this happens in dialogue, when we can be with each other, join in community, work toward wholeness, and take these difficult moments or circumstances as an opportunity to set things right, as Jesus did in our story today.

With the man's "I am" statement, "I am the man", he is saying that he has now taken on Jesus' identity (the great "I am") an identity of someone who can bring light into the world. He is not just a different man in that he can now see, he is a different person, who now sees the world through the lens of Jesus. This is our call too, especially in this season of Lent, to prepare ourselves to see the world more fully through the lens of Jesus, as resurrected people. Lent is a season in which we move past the expected, the conventional, the easy answers and trust that God is drawing us out of the shadows of complacency or comfort and into the brightness of discipleship, so we may see the glory of God around us. Amen.