

## Lent IV

***“We must work the works of the One who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work.”*** John 9: 4

The story of the man born blind is one of the best-told tales in all the New Testament. This is the Gospelist John at his narrative peak: scenes unfold smoothly, characters are sharply defined, profound theological questions are explored, and the dialogue whips along, ironically revealing the paradox of a blind man who achieves sight while the religious authorities prove blind. And although the emotional content of the drama is only implied, we can easily imagine anger, hurt, outrage, confusion, fear, and, ultimately, the quiet triumph of justice and faith.

It’s a great story, a story which offers many opportunities for interpretation, and also many challenges, on this day when it is also my bittersweet responsibility to speak of Gretchen’s three-year ministry here as she prepared to depart for her new post as Priest-in-Charge at St Paul’s in Newton Highlands.

As I meditated about this Gospel, it occurred to me that here we may have the origin of the all-too-familiar adage: seeing is believing. We may associate that truism with the disciple Thomas and his insisting on seeing and touching the wounds of the Risen Christ – only then did he believe in the Resurrection. And Jesus reproaches him, again in the words of the Gospel of John, *Blessed are those who do not see and yet believe*. Faith, genuine faith, is supposed to occur independent of evidence – at least, those were the operating instructions to members of the Jesus movement who had never seen Jesus in the flesh. Seeing is believing, to Thomas, and that has been judged by some as an inferior form of faith.

But it’s also true of the man born blind. He doesn’t have faith in Jesus before he’s healed. Indeed, the birth of his faith has more to do with the skepticism of the Pharisees, his rejection by his parents, and his excommunication from the community than it does with the physical miracle of his sudden sightedness. His faith is born and strengthened through his personal adversity, as well as through his observation, I would say, of the fear and vested interests and corruption of the political establishment and their opposition both to him and to the man who healed him. His story is an illustration of my favorite passage in all scripture, the assurance from Romans we heard last week: *Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope,*

*and hope will not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.*

I think also that we could reverse the cliché I cited a couple of minutes ago and draw another lesson from the story of the man born blind: *believing is seeing*. We all see selectively; we select what we see, and chose the evidence that matters to us, through the lens of our believing. As the blind man grows in wisdom and understanding of the dynamics at work around him— his parents' fear and cowardice, the Pharisee's rigidity and prejudice— he sees more clearly the holiness of Jesus. As his beliefs emerge, his spiritual sight, his insight, broadens and deepens, and his faith is secured.

Now here's where I'm getting to Gretchen. She's been here for three years, and I couldn't preach a sermon long enough to include all she has done for us. We have all be the grateful recipients of her abounding energy, her good humor, her efficiency, her creativity, her wit, her amazing intelligence, her loyalty, and most of all, her faithful witness to the love and glory of God. We all know about her many gifts; we all are enduringly in her debt for her untiring contributions to our life together in Christ. And I want you to tell her what you know; I charge you, and us, each and every one, to be as forthright and eloquent as we can be in testifying to her what she means to us. Your words, your witness, will reflect back her ministry to her and will inform and ground and strengthen her as she goes forth to lead a congregation of her own.

And I will give my own private testimony of gratitude and appreciation to Gretchen, as I have tried to do these three years. Now I want to talk about something a bit different: what I saw when Gretchen first came here, and what I see now.

When Gretchen first came to talk to me – and we have discussed this, so she won't be surprised, I hope, at what I say – when she first came here she was confused, resentful and angry. And rightfully so. She had been stopped in the ordination process for reasons that she didn't understand and still doesn't, entirely. She was not exactly enamored of religious authorities and of course, I was one.

Now, the reasons for her being stopped had not been clearly explained to me, nor have they been to this day. But I had the advantage of years of experience with the ordination process, and I have fundamental, though not absolute, faith in it. Mostly, I think, the Holy Spirit manages to work in, around, or through the Church to get those people ordained who are truly called to the vocation. And sometimes a temporary halt is what the Holy Spirit has in mind, or at least, what She uses to accomplish her purposes.

And I believed in the people who had sent Gretchen our way. They knew me, they knew St. John's, and I had faith that they would not send us a lemon. So I started looking beyond that unhappy, perplexed person sitting in my study. And I began to see the Gretchen whom we have all now come to know and to love. So in this case, believing begat seeing. I used the frame of the ordination process as I understood it, the frame of those who thought St John's would be a good home for Gretchen, and the frame of my own experience as a supervisor and mentor. And I saw: a winner! I saw a priest.

Now this did not happen all in one blinding flash, any more that the man who was born blind became an instant convert to the Jesus movement. My sense of Gretchen's gifts and talents, her character, and her suitability for ordination, grew over time. But it got its start through the same method Jesus employs in today's Gospel.

If you remember, in the beginning the disciples are all over the question of why the man was born blind – did he sin, or did his parents? The going theory was that physical handicaps and illnesses were caused by sin or spiritual deformities, and the disciples want to solve this intellectual problem: who sinned? But what does Jesus tell them? *We must work the works of the One who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work.*

In other words, this is no time to be standing around debating theology. We have work to do. Our business is healing; let's get to it. Jesus' business is not about solving inscrutable academic problems, it's about helping people, showing compassion, working for justice. *The harvest is plentiful, the laborers are few*, and all that.

And so I put Gretchen to work. And what a worker she is, as we have all marvelously beheld these three years. We did not sit around talking a whole lot of theology, we plunged into the activities of Lent, with mid-week services and Sunday morning adult ed discussions, and then there was Holy Week and Easter, and so forth. There was the Capital Campaign, for which Gretchen did heroic amounts of research and grant-writing. And so forth,

I said I wouldn't rehearse all of her activities and attributes, and I won't. But you get the picture. Gretchen worked. She worked hard, and cheerfully, and eagerly, and creatively. And you know, when people act, as often as not their faith gets in gear. If Gretchen had doubts about God and Christianity and the Church and faith –well, I know she had some– *when* she had those doubts, I believe they were assuaged by her full and devoted participation in this community.

Indeed, it was as Paul promises in his letter to the Romans, *Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope will not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.* Remember, the man born blind did not achieve faith instantly. Rather, he went about tackling all the issues, the strange resistances and animosities and questions, which sprang up around the miracle of his healing. And lo and behold, his faith in Jesus was the outcome.

Just so, Gretchen went around tackling all the issues of life in a community of faith, with a commitment and an understanding among all of us that she was not just passing through, that she was here to stay and here to contribute and here to learn. And, I believe, her faith in the Church and, to some degree at least, in the wisdom of the process, was restored and grew. Her anger and angst fell away. She was healed, and has become the marvelous priest she is. The priest we will send forth, after next week, to console, to lead, and to inspire, a community of her own.

Now this is not to say that Gretchen has drunk some Episcopalian Kool-Aid and now believes in a perfect Church. That's really not what I have to offer people who come to me for guidance and mentoring. I like to think I'm not overly cynical; as I said earlier I have some fundamental faith in the ordination process, and when all is said and done, I love the Church. The Church has held me and healed me, and I have watched the Church perform that miracle of holding and healing for many others. What I have to offer is not an airbrushed version of the Church, but more along the lines of, in the words of that great song "The Gambler: "*know when to hold'em, know when to fold'em, know when to walk away, know when to run.*

Or in other words, know what battles to join, and what simply to offer up to God. And I think Gretchen has had to offer up a good deal to God in the course of these three years. But at the same time she has found a parish home, a spiritual community that has nurtured her and encouraged her and continued to raise her up in her call and her vocation. We all can, and should rejoice in this, for ourselves and for her. We offered her the possibility of new faith and new hope at a time when those blessings may have seemed at a premium.

Now, I want to bring this back for a moment to the man born blind. At first glance, the story seems to present a miraculous healing by Jesus, the miracle worker. But when we delve deeper, as I have tried to do this morning, we can see the real blessing here may not be the gift of sight, but the gift of faith. And that gift does not come directly

from Jesus to the man born blind. Rather, it is mediated by the community – a community that interrogates, that tests, that judges, that rejects. And that very testing, that very rejection, is what gives birth and then growth and strength to the man’s conviction. It is that very hardship which sends him into the arms of Jesus, and makes him a believer, a witness, and a disciple. It is that very hardship that ushers him into a new community: the community of discipleship, the community of the kingdom, *the community working the work of Jesus and the One who sent him.*

Next week we will be sending Gretchen forth into a new community, a band of the faithful who have their life together just a few miles from here. New, and not new– she has been there before, some of those folks already know and love her, and I believe she will be welcomed warmly. And we know that our separation is not complete– she will be going forth to lead our brothers and sisters in Christ, members of the same body, who live and move and have their being in the same hope of the coming of the kingdom of God and of the Resurrection.

As Gretchen herself would say, How great is that!

Amen