

“The Possibility of Grace in Painful Times”

Andrew Foster Connors

John 9:1-41

4th Sunday in Lent

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Somebody tell Jesus you don't go spitting into dirt and rubbing it into people's eyes. You wash your hands while singing the Happy Birthday song through twice to get the full 20 seconds recommended by the CDC, put on a mask and gloves before you ever get close to anyone who needs healing. But Coronavirus Christ spits on the ground and makes mud with his saliva and spreads the mud on the man's eyes. Well that is just nasty.

It's not even clear that this man born blind wants or needs healing anyway. He doesn't say anything about having any problem with his blindness. It's the community that's the problem. He needs a neighborhood, a town, a community where blindness doesn't lead to begging. Where disability doesn't lead you to become destitute. His blindness isn't the problem. It's the community's refusal to adapt.

Maybe Jesus knows this already since this little act of healing causes problems for everybody - and I mean everybody. The man's parents are pestered with questions they don't have answers to. The neighbors are all riled up. The religious authorities are mad as ever. And the man born blind seems to get the brunt of the problems. Everybody demands that he explain what happened. He's got no clue. He doesn't know how his eyes were opened. He doesn't know who Jesus really is. He doesn't know anything about the relationship between sin and power and healing and he doesn't really care. All he knows is that someone put mud on his eyes and now he can see. And for this, he's driven out of his own town.

It makes me think how often the church has it backward about Jesus. So often we try to sell Jesus as one who's going to make your life so much easier. He's going to bring healing and health and purpose and power. Turn to Jesus and you will be touched by the divine. Turn to Jesus and you will receive the gift of new birth into the family of God. Turn to Jesus and you will have life and life abundant. No one that I know puts banners in front of their church or on their car that says, "Turn to Jesus and you'll be kicked out of town."

But that's what happens to the man born blind. Healing disrupts the entire community. It destabilizes the neighborhood. It brings change no one asked for, no one expected, and no one understands. I guess the lesson is something that most of us know already: nobody likes change that we're not in charge of. No one likes change

that we cannot control. We would rather people stay in the limited roles that we have designated for them.

The man born blind had become known solely as the man born blind. That was his role. People counted on him to be the man who sat and begged. They expected him to go on fulfilling that role. They had reduced him almost entirely to it. The *blind beggar*. He's not even named in the entire 41 verse story. Maybe his neighbors didn't even know his name. He's like the woman with the cardboard sign standing on the corner of Mt. Royal and North Ave. People look at her and think to themselves, "drug addict." Or the man who walks through Bolton Hill asking for help. People see him coming and think "homeless man." Or the "squeegee boys" on the corners. Notice how we reduce them all down to the limited attributes that we think are significant. And then when someone does something that pushes up against those boundaries or is freed from them, we are the ones who are surprised.

It reminds me of this kid I went to high school with. We ran on the cross country team together. Sandy was the slowest kid on the team. Lanky and lean, some of the kids made fun of him because sometimes in practice, he had to stop running and walk. One time a parent picked him up in the middle of a practice run and he never heard the end of it. Few people on the team bothered to get to know him to learn about how he used to be one of the fastest kids in middle school until an injury set him back. So he languished in that giant bucket of a category in high school, marked "insignificant" for his entire first year. Race after race, he crossed the finish line last. And then one day he didn't. Midway through a race, inexplicably he picked up speed - a lot of speed. From the back of the pack he started moving up, picking off runners one at a time. "He's going to fade," a teammate panted out, alongside me as Sandy passed us midway through the race. But Sandy didn't fade out. For the rest of the season he came in in the top three. Then won the regionals. Then made it to the state meet. And all these people were mystified, some even angry. There were unfounded whispers of steroids or drugs of some sort. How could this have happened otherwise? Pretty soon he had a girlfriend. And people were upset about that. Slow Sandy isn't supposed to have a significant other. He's not *entitled* to a lover. Only a few people celebrated his rise to the top.

It makes me sad to think now that someone else's triumph was so difficult for other people to accept. But it wouldn't be surprising to the man born blind, or to Jesus himself. Flannery O'Connor wrote once that "All human nature vigorously resists grace because grace changes us and the change is painful."¹ Maybe that is why almost no one in the healed man's community sees the healing that happened to him as good

¹ Flannery O'Connor, *The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O'Connor*, (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1988), 213. Thanks to Mark Ramsey who noted this quote in "Homiletical Perspective," *Feasting on the Gospels, John, Volume 1*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), 2015, p. 301.

news. Why no seems to recognize it, much less celebrate it, as grace. What they see is the pain that is brought about because of the change. Change is painful. And it's hard to see grace when you are in pain.

This has me thinking about all the change that we've all experienced in the last week. Much of it has been painful. There's the fear of getting sick or making other people sick. If not fear for yourself, then fear for people in those high risk categories in our families. There's the fear of health care workers getting ill, or not having the right equipment, or being overwhelmed by the potential number of cases that may emerge. Then there's the work stoppage. For some this is a huge inconvenience. For others the loss of work and pay raises basic questions like, how are we going to eat? How are we going to pay for medicine or healthcare or clothing? I don't want to minimize that kind of fear or the uncertainty that so many are facing in relationship to their own job pay or security.

And, at the same time, I don't want to be blind to grace that arises in the midst of this same crisis. For one, there is the extraordinarily positive impact that massive economic shutdowns are having on the planet. Many people have seen the photos of the canals in Venice which have shown marked improvements in water quality since the quarantines went into effect. Air quality has seen enormous improvements in areas where quarantines were encouraged or imposed. The CO2 levels in the atmosphere declined so precipitously over Wuhan, China during its quarantines that experts are already predicting that this shutdown will give them lots of new information about how to tackle climate change going forward. One Stanford University expert speculates that somewhere between 50,000 and 75,000 premature deaths have been prevented already, simply due to cleaner air across China.² That doesn't mean that pandemics are good, this scientist says. "It means that the way our economies operate absent pandemics have massive hidden health costs, and it takes a pandemic to help see that." What if we found a way to give the planet a rest without a pandemic?

With the growing economic crisis there's talk about the government doing things like giving people \$1000 checks, or making new investments to get the economy going. Suddenly things that didn't seem possible in our economy, rules that seemed fixed, are thrown open. What if we took this opportunity to reimagine how our economy could work for more people instead of always living in fear that the one we have is the one we have to accept as is?

And then there's the creativity that so many have practiced to the benefit of community. The puzzle championship that I learned about yesterday -a family challenge, video-conferenced across physical distance. We don't have to wait until a pandemic to connect with others like that. The important conversations that some have

²<https://www.newshub.co.nz/home/world/2020/03/all-the-ways-coronavirus-is-stopping-climate-change-in-its-tracks.html>

finally had time to have. The neighborhoods that have come together for mutual support. I joined a group of backyard neighbors on Friday night for happy hour from our porches as we discussed ways to keep everyone safe like neighborhood grocery runs, ways to support local business through take out, alongside updates on the most recent news and information. What if we took this time to strengthen the neighborhood - literally and figuratively - by returning to the relationships at the center of all community?

It's the community, after all, that John's Gospel is so focused on. This community of Christians who produced John's Gospel in the second century only recently had been ousted from the synagogue. The tension between Jews who believed Jesus was Messiah and Jews who didn't finally led to a painful split. It accounts, in part, for why the religious leadership is portrayed with so much contempt. John's community - the Johannine community - told this story, in part, to reassure people in the church that healing from Jesus seems to carry a community cost. And in so doing they were imagining a different community together - one where their own pain of exclusion didn't have to have the last word. They had a different possibility for a different kind of community together. A community marked by grace. A community that understood that while human beings may vigorously resist grace, the grace of God is ultimately impossible to reject. It finds its way into our lives one way or another. Why not welcome it as best as we can, together?

I hope we can discover that together all across Baltimore, across the country, across the world. The virus is a terrible thing, yes, but the community that has already been shaped and formed because of it is a bright spot of grace. One author put it this way. "‘Flattening the curve,’ a phrase few of us had heard of a month ago, has arrived as an urgent national mantra akin to Rosie the Riveter’s ‘We can do it.’ It is a collective act of almost unprecedented community spirit, a fundamental statement of how we stand together as a species. The many act to protect the few—an almost tribal, communitarian instinct that is all too rare in modern life. . . The most isolating thing most of us has ever done is, ironically, almost surely the most collective experience we’ve ever had in our lifetimes."³

As painful as that collective spirit is, could it be the kind of thing that we’ve been waiting for? A new recognition that we are more connected than ever, that borders are human creations not divine ones? That we can change our neighborhoods, our communities, even our planet in significant ways when we choose to act together? In the midst of terrible illness, could God be at work in more powerful ways than we ever imagined?

³ "What Americans are Doing Now is Beautiful, Garrett M. Graff, *The Atlantic*, March 19, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/03/inspiring-galvanizing-beautiful-spirit-2020/608308/>