

SUNDAY MESSAGE
Trinity Episcopal Church, Orange CA
Sunday, March 22, 2020 Fourth Sunday in Lent
The Very Rev. Jeannie Martz

Collect for the Fourth Sunday in Lent: Gracious Father, whose blessed Son Jesus Christ came down from heaven to be the true bread which gives life to the world: Evermore give us this bread, that he may live in us, and we in him; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Welcome to our first online Sunday Message on the Fourth Sunday in the most unusual Lent any of us has ever experienced!

Each Sunday morning in this Lenten journey, as long as we are homebound, the assigned preacher of the day will post a message reflecting on our Sunday Scripture readings and will also include a prayer at the end of the message for the coming week.

As a little piece of community, I'd like to encourage each of us to stop for a moment at 5 p.m. each day and pray this weekly prayer together, even while apart.

The Scripture readings for today are:

1 Samuel 16:1-13, the anointing of David by Samuel

Psalm 23

Ephesians 5:8-14, "Once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light."

John 9:1-41, the healing of the man born blind

Rev. Jeannie's message

Forty to forty-five years ago, a rabbi named Edwin Friedman and his mentor Murray Bowen began to popularize a way of looking at relationships that's become known as "family systems theory".

The basic premise of family systems theory is that whether we're talking about a congregation, an office, a club, or an actual family – or, for that matter, a society, a state, or a nation – the dynamics of how we relate to each other and how our behavior affects each other are the same.

Of primary importance to a system (or family; the terms are often used interchangeably), whether the system is healthy or not, says Friedman, is maintaining balance, or homeostasis, within itself.

Keeping the balance, whatever it is; not rocking the boat, is so important in a system that if it has to, said Friedman, the members of a system will use “inner adjusting compensations” to maintain the status quo – and certainly we’re seeing and experiencing this today as the various levels of our government and the various systems in which we participate, including our own families, all scramble to regain some kind of balance in the midst of major disruption to our collective status quo.

The whole framework for our reading this morning from John’s Gospel is the multiple systems of family, society, and synagogue using “inner adjusting compensations” to try to regain the balance tossed out of kilter by Jesus’ healing of the man born blind.

Only one thing has changed: the man born blind can now see; but this one change impacts every system, every network of relationships, in which the man participates.

“As he walked along, Jesus saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’” This may seem an odd question to us, but just as health and material wellbeing are seen in Jesus’ time as signs of God’s favor and as evidence of righteous living, so also are illness, poverty, and misfortune taken to be signs that all is not well between the individual so affected and God – and because the man has been blind since before he was born, the question of the righteousness of his parents comes into play as well.

Neither of these things, says Jesus. This man is blind so that God can be glorified through him, and he proceeds to spit in the dust and make mud. Then, mirroring God creating Man out of the dust of the earth in Genesis, Jesus applies the mud to the man’s eyes, essentially “re-creating” them. He sends the man to wash in the pool of Siloam and the man comes back able to see; and the systems begin to change.

First to change is the neighborhood system, the man’s relationship with his neighbors; and in this system as well as his family system there’s a major change in the man’s status. He’s been blind all his life, a disabled beggar living on the charity of others and unable to provide for a family of his own. For years he’s been the butt of jokes and the target of every bully around...and now, he can see.

After a debate about the man’s identity (“Some [neighbors] were saying, ‘It is he.’ Others were saying, ‘No, but it is someone like him.’”) and his own testimony about a healer he can’t produce, the neighbors try to rebalance the system by taking the man before the Pharisees.

Because they’re divided among themselves about whether or not Jesus is from God, the Pharisees ask the healed man what he has to say about Jesus. In the growing spiritual sight that is accompanying his physical sight, the man says, “He is a prophet.”

“The Jews”, which is how John refers to the religious establishment, take over the interrogation from the larger group of Pharisees and they call in the man’s parents – representatives of

another system impacted by his healing. Out of fear for themselves and their relationship with the synagogue and with their neighbors – because to be cast out of the synagogue means the loss of all one's support systems – the parents refer the question of the healing back to their formerly blind, formerly dependent son: "He's of age; ask him."

Ironically, in all these verses where "Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind", there's no celebration because there's too much strain, too much sudden imbalance in the systems. One author comments, "...there is no joy, no praise, no thanking God, no encouragement, only quarreling." A man born blind can see, and even his parents back away.

A man born blind can see, and he is driven out of the synagogue for standing up to those in authority, effectively upsetting this system's balance.

Jesus changed this man's life by giving him life. The man's neighbors responded by rejecting him, his parents denied him, and his religious community got rid of him. However, just as Jesus will later promise the disciples that he'll never abandon them, Jesus doesn't abandon this man either. When he hears that the man has been expelled, Jesus seeks the man out and calls him into a new relationship, saying "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" The man accepts Jesus' invitation and worships him by saying, "Lord, I believe."

The smallest change in a system changes the system, and the system will fight that change. Jesus changed the man's systems, first by giving him sight, and second by calling the man his own – and the man's systems fought back.

Jesus has also changed the systems of the community John is writing for: their spiritual eyes have been opened, they see Jesus clearly, they are his through baptism, and we know that they too are being persecuted by those around them. They too are being cast out of their synagogues and rejected by their families and their neighbors.

What about us? If this Gospel reading tells us anything, if systems theory tells us anything, they tell us that to be a Christian is to buck the systems in which we live; and to buck our systems is to get bucked back.

At the end of the reading, the Pharisees ask Jesus about their own spiritual status and it's important to hear what he says to them in reply: "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains."

We are people who say, "We see." We are people who say, "Lord, we believe." We are people who have been given new life through baptism and now say, "I will, with God's help." All these statements that we make are answers to questions that buck the systems of the world – and as we give these answers and live out of these questions, if we're not upsetting the balance somewhere, we're working too hard to keep the balance. Food for thought. Amen.

A final thought: one system NOT to buck these days is the system of preventative measures that's designed and implemented to keep our other systems of relationship safe. *Let's continue to stay home as much as we can, wash our hands frequently, keep cleaning items and surfaces we touch a lot, avoid touching our faces – and pray for everyone who works on the medical front lines and all first responders.*

We can and will get through this, with God's help.

A Prayer for This Week

My friends, even in the midst of a global pandemic, computer gremlins are alive and well! One very important petition from the prayer at the end of my Sunday Message this morning is out spinning in cyberspace somewhere and needs to be reinserted.

Here is the complete text of the prayer that I invite us to say together, while apart, at 5 p.m. each day this week:

Let us pray to God, in whom alone we dwell in safety:

For those who are guiding our state and our nation at this time and shaping our public policies, that they may make wise decisions;

For doctors, nurses, and medical researchers, that through their skill and insights many will be restored to health;

For the vulnerable and the fearful, for the gravely ill and the dying, that they may know your comfort and peace;

We commend ourselves, and all for whom we pray, to the mercy and protection of God.

Merciful God, accept these prayers for the sake of your Son, our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.