

**1 Samuel 16:1-13** “but the LORD looks on the heart.”

**Psalms 23** “The LORD is my shepherd.”

**Ephesians 5:8-14** “live as children of light.”

**John 9:1-41** “As Jesus walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. <sup>2</sup>His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” <sup>3</sup>Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind. So that God’s works might be revealed in him, <sup>4</sup>we must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. <sup>5</sup>As long as I am in the world, I am a light of the world.” <sup>6</sup>When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes, <sup>7</sup>saying to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see.

<sup>8</sup>The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, “Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?” <sup>9</sup>Some were saying, “It is he.” Others were saying, “No, but it is someone like him.” He kept saying, “I am the man.” <sup>10</sup>But they kept asking him, “Then how were your eyes opened?” <sup>11</sup>He answered, “The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, ‘Go to Siloam and wash.’ Then I went and washed and received my sight.” <sup>12</sup>They said to him, “Where is he?” He said, “I do not know.”

<sup>13</sup>They brought to the **Episcopalians** the man who had formerly been blind. <sup>14</sup>Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. <sup>15</sup>Then the **Episcopalians** also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, “He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see.” <sup>16</sup>Some of the **Episcopalians** said, “This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath.” But others said, “How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?” And they were divided. <sup>17</sup>So they said again to the blind man, “What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.” He said, “He is a prophet.” <sup>18</sup>The **people** did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight <sup>19</sup>and asked them, “Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?” <sup>20</sup>His parents answered, “We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; <sup>21</sup>but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.” <sup>22</sup>His parents said this because they were afraid of the **people**; for the **people** had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the **gathering**. <sup>23</sup>Therefore his parents said, “He is of age; ask him.” <sup>24</sup>So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, “Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner.” <sup>25</sup>He answered, “I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.” <sup>26</sup>They said to him, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?” <sup>27</sup>He answered them, “I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?” <sup>28</sup>Then they reviled him, saying, “You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. <sup>29</sup>We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.” <sup>30</sup>The man answered, “Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. <sup>31</sup>We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. <sup>32</sup>Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. <sup>33</sup>If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.” <sup>34</sup>They answered him, “You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?” And they drove him out.

<sup>35</sup>Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” <sup>36</sup>He answered, “And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.” <sup>37</sup>Jesus said to him, “You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.” <sup>38</sup>He said, “Lord, I believe.”

And he worshiped him. <sup>39</sup>Jesus said, “I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.” <sup>40</sup>Some of the **Episcopalians** near him heard this and said to him, “Surely we are not blind, are we?” <sup>41</sup>Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.

**O God of our vision, grant us the strength, the wisdom and the courage to seek always and everywhere after truth, come when it may, and cost what it will.**

Today I am preaching to a virtual congregation during the early days of a pandemic, the first Sunday in which our sanctuary is closed for worship since the fire in the fall of 2000, when Emmanuel quickly secured another place to gather, to continue being church. When one physical place becomes inaccessible, we typically comfort and reassure ourselves by gathering in another place. We are not used to responding to a big crisis with restraint and a discipline of distance from one another. We are trained to care for one another by sharing food, to reassure one another with physical presence especially when we don’t know the words to say. So in these early days of this pandemic, we are trying to figure out and learn new ways of being together virtually. The truth is, I feel intermittently creative and inspired, and clumsy and completely inadequate like I’m trying to build something using my grandchildren’s toddler tools. But once again, we are learning to be church in a new way.

How can we be the best version of ourselves during this time of disease and death, during this time of social and financial peril? Because in the end, what matters is how we treat one another. How can we offer what Dr. Paul Farmer calls “expert mercy”? Well to become experts at anything, we have to practice. How can we practice doing justice and loving compassion and walking humbly with the One, Who is infinite Love, infinite Mercy, infinite Compassion, while we are in quarantine? For those of us not yet quarantined, once we’ve washed our hands multiple times each day, and said our prayers, and kept the recommended distance from each other, then what?

Today is the liturgical anniversary of my arrival at Emmanuel Church, twelve years ago on the fourth Sunday in Lent. I’ve been rector for ten years; the first two years I was part of a rent-to-own program. Twelve years ago on the fourth Sunday in Lent, it was a lectionary year A, which means that walking in the door, these were the lessons dealt to me by our lectionary calendar. I knew almost nothing about the people who would be listening to me preach that day, and it strikes me that is oddly true again today because I don’t know who is listening. Never has the aphorism that a preacher is preaching first to herself been more true! Our first two readings are fairly easy going, and the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm a softball pitch. But the ninth chapter of the Gospel of John as we have received it is truly dreadful. (So I made some adjustments in our Deacon Bob’s text.)

Twelve years ago, I had had a bit of a break between leaving St. Paul’s in Brookline and arriving at Emmanuel Church, Boston. I had extra time to fret about how I might handle my first sermon in this pulpit. As the date neared, I decided that I would just have to go for it, and so I collected about 80 red pencils for our trusty and welcoming head usher, Steve Babcock to hand out with the bulletins. Maybe those of you who’ve met Steve can imagine his raised eyebrows. I’m going for it again today. (Steve, I hope you’re watching!)

I think chapter 9 of the Gospel of John might offer us some Good News, but first we need to remove some of the stumbling blocks and acknowledge the scandals that are deeply embedded

in our Church teachings. I start with a red pencil to correct the punctuation in verse 3. Many of you know that punctuation, in terms of sentence structure, was invented in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries of the Common Era. Punctuation is pretty new. Many of you know our oldest copies of our scripture lack spaces between words or sentences; there are no lowercase letters. Our oldest copies of the Gospels read like a giant Greek wordfind puzzle, and in most cases, the pieces aren't even full sheets. Many times, the place where one word ends and another begins, or where one sentence ends and another begins, although obscure, is not debated. Other times, the placement of a comma or a period can change the entire theological meaning of a passage of scripture.

In the third line down of the Gospel reading in your worship bulletin, there should be a period after the phrase, "he was born blind." In other words, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind." [Period.] That's Jesus' answer to the question of whose sin made this man blind from birth – his or his parents? "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind." Then the next sentence begins, "So that God's works might be revealed in him, [comma,] we must work the works of the One who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work."<sup>1</sup> And the sense of the word "must" is more like, "it behooves us." It behooves us to work the works of the One who sent Jesus while it is day.<sup>2</sup> Behoove is a much more interesting word than must. Re-punctuated, this story goes from being about a god who chooses certain people to suffer in order to reveal glory, to being about God's glory being able to be revealed in every human being no matter what the differences in our various abilities or sufferings if and when "we live lives worthy of the calling to which we have been called (with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love)."<sup>3</sup> Jesus' response to his disciples' question about who sinned indicates to me that he thought the disciples were asking the wrong question (as we disciples often do). What I hear Jesus saying is, "it's not about finding fault. *And* you are wasting the precious time that God has given you asking questions like that about whose fault it is." Suffering is not about divine will or divine punishment. Furthermore, we do not have the luxury of sitting in either judgment or despair. We have real work to do and it's urgent. And I would add that we can even do it in quarantine.

And another thing. Jesus says, "As long as I am in the world, I am a light of the world." There is no definite article before the word light. Here, Jesus is claiming to be a light, not the light. Jesus might be our true light. Jesus is my true light. But Jesus is not the only light.

The other big stumbling block or scandal in this Gospel portion today is the part about fear and division and rivalry in the first (through twenty-first) century Christian community that gets blamed on "the Jews" and on "the Pharisees." The caricature of Pharisees in the Gospel of John is irresponsible and it is unjust. In our Christian tradition, the codification of that contention between the Jesus followers and those who did not follow Jesus has polluted Christian people and done immeasurable harm to Jewish people. We dishonor Jesus – we dishonor God -- when we proclaim a gospel that repeatedly teaches fear or contempt for Judaism, whether in ancient times or contemporary time, whether explicitly or implicitly. As a Church, we must not passively receive and repeat language that dishonors God no matter how widely agreed upon it is. And we

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<sup>1</sup>John C. Poirier, "'Day and Night' and the Punctuation of John 9:3." in *New Testament Studies* 42 (1996) 288-294. My thanks to Christine Carr for leading me to this article.

<sup>2</sup>D. Mark Davis, [www.leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com](http://www.leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com) blog entry for this Gospel reading.

<sup>3</sup>Ephesians 4:1-2.

must not drift away and let dishonorable language be someone else's last word.<sup>4</sup> The libel of the Church has caused Pharisee to become a bad word – but Pharisees were people like us, and Jesus was probably a Pharisee himself, or at least schooled by the Pharisees. So if we are going to tell an anachronistic story, I prefer “Episcopalians” as a substitute word for Pharisees. And in this reading, we should substitute “people” for “Jews,” and “gathering,” which is the root meaning of “synagogue.” It's not a perfect solution, but it is my faithful contribution to a complex ongoing challenge.

This year as I studied chapter 9 of John, I noticed that it is right in the middle of the Gospel and it rings with the allusions to the creation story and foreshadowing to the trial, crucifixion, and resurrection narrative. It's a midrash – right in the middle. The story is about Jesus not *restoring* sight but *creating* sight out of dirt – out of mud, just like God creating the dirtling that we call Adam. The imagery of darkness and light, and the Biblical idea of believing, as in believing in God or believing in Love or believing in Jesus or believing in Moses: it's being loyal to, putting one's trust in. It's not an academic or intellectual exercise. In the Bible, believing is seeing and not the other way around. Believing in the “Son of Man” has to do with fidelity to Jesus as salt of the earth, as a mensch, as everyman. The other day I heard someone ask, “If that's what Jesus was, then what makes Jesus special?” My answer is “We do! We make Jesus special. Love does! Love makes Jesus special.”

The COVID-19 pandemic is changing our lives so fast that I cannot tell you what Emmanuel Church will look like next week, but I can tell you about this past week. I can tell you what Love has made special, what Love has made possible and what we have done in response. This week people have given gifts of money to Emmanuel Church so that we can maintain and even extend our ministry. Love has reminded us of our mission assets of a large building and a wide-open community. This week our musicians have been working on how to offer their gifts of music in ways that don't require being physically present to hear. This week with Ecclesia Ministries, Emmanuel Church has increased our capacity to be a place of rest and recharging for people who are unhoused or inadequately sheltered, as other places are shutting down, we have extended our offering of a place to use the bathrooms, to wash hands, to recharge phones, to get something to eat. This week my colleague Phil LaBelle, Rector of St. Mark's in Southborough put a dozen bottles of hand sanitizer in the mail to me when he heard my despair that our on-line order had been cancelled. This week, Safe Haven Shelter has continued to provide for the women in their care. This week, the people of Central Reform Temple have increased their giving to support the ministries of Emmanuel Church. This week, 12-step meetings and the Friday Recovery Prayer service have continued. This week Emmanuelites have reached out to offer assistance with errands, deliveries, phone calls and emails to check on one another. The vestry has begun reaching out to everyone in the parish directory for whom we have contact information. If you want to be added to that list, please contact the parish office by email. Even if you've never been an Emmanuelite before, if you are participating in our service this morning, from wherever you are on your spiritual journey, we consider you an Emmanuelite, and we are giving thanks to God for you. In the week to come, reach out to one another in Love through the phone or a text or an email and give thanks to *God With Us*, Emmanuel.

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<sup>4</sup>For further study see the work of the Christian Scholars Group at the Center for Christian-Jewish Learning at Boston College, especially their statement issued September 2002 entitled, “A Sacred Obligation: Rethinking Christian Faith in Relation to Judaism and the Jewish People.”