

A note from Pastor Gail (715-352-2492, 8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m., or any time for emergencies)

In the name of our risen Lord I greet you from afar. As of this mailing (email or snail mail) this is the situation report for both St. John and St. Stephen. Starting with the sermon and announcements for March 29, you should receive them before next Sunday.

All in-person events are canceled officially until Easter (April 12th); it's very likely that our celebration of Easter will be postponed. The threat of this new coronavirus is dangerous for most of us and deadly for some, and I encourage all of you to abide by every decision of the CDC and our local and national government.

Both congregation Councils would like your input on who might need assistance of any kind during this "time out" from our normal lives. Please let us know if someone needs shopping and/or delivery of food or other items, and reach out to those you know who are isolated.

Each congregation has emails for around 40 members/families, and I will be in regular contact with all. Those for whom we don't have an email address will receive snail mail copies of the weekly sermon, plus any additional notes or announcements each week.

There are several telecasts of worship services on Saturday evening and Sunday morning. If you want to hear an ELCA sermon, you can take advantage of the following websites:

- Adventchurch.org (Advent ELCA, Cedarburg): click CONNECT at top, click SERMON on drop-down menu
- <https://www.facebook.com/sjlcSpencer> (St John, Spencer, Pr. Rebeka Tarras), live sermon on Sundays at 9:00
- Faith Lutheran Church, Chico CA (online worship Sundays at 9:30 a.m. **Pacific time, 2 hours earlier**)
- <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCY1mJOaCwAenJA.35Q7Z69g> (Calvary, Green Bay; usually complete service including special music—it's a long address, but a good site)

Please recognize that without your financial support, our ministries and "services" (not only worship services) will not continue. I urge you to mail your checks to either congregation. For those in the vicinity of St. John, there's a locked mail box inside the eastern back door of the office building (where the keypad is); feel free to drop your offering in that. (It might be helpful for you to write only 1 check a month.) You may also be able to arrange for direct deposit into the account of either congregation by so instructing your own bank; both congregations have accounts at ACB; Mary Jo Werner is our primary contact, but anyone else should be able to help you set this up.

For St. John members, if you were planning to donate to the special fund for the Nowak family at the Palm Sunday breakfast, feel free to make a special donation and it will be forwarded to them when they return from Milwaukee.

Together we are the body of Christ, the communion of saints, the fellowship of believers. When schools and work environments are shut down, that's when we most have need of each other. Remember that God has always provided for his chosen people and will always be there—*here!*—for us. God loves you and so do I!

Gospel and Sermon for March 22, 2020

The Holy Gospel according to John, the 9th chapter (9:1-41):

As Jesus walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." 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, saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam (which means *Sent*)." Then he went and washed and came back able to see.

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?" Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him." He kept saying, "I am the man." But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" 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." They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know."

They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. Then the Pharisees 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." Some of the Pharisees 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. 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."

The Jews 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 and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" His parents answered, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; 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." His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him."

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." He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" 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?" Then they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciples, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from." The man answered, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." They answered him, "You were born entirely in sin, and are you trying to teach us?" And they drove him out.

Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" He answered him, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him." Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." He said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped him. 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." Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, "Surely we are not blind, are we?"

Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains."

This is the Gospel of our Lord.

“Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” The Jews in Jesus’ day believed suffering was the result of sin. The more you suffered, the greater your sin must have been. Way back in the Ten Commandments, Moses told the people God would punish the children for the iniquity of the parents “unto the third and fourth generation.”

“Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus answers, “You’re asking the wrong question. You’re looking for someone to blame. There’s no cause and effect here. Look instead for what God can do.”

We remember from the story of Adam and Eve how the “blame game” began: the serpent tempted Eve, she tempted Adam, and they both ate. Immediately they knew they were naked, and they hid themselves from the Lord. When the Lord confronted them with their sin (eating the forbidden fruit), Adam said, “The woman you gave me tempted me, and I ate.” (You see how he blames the woman, and even blames *God* for giving him the woman!). And Eve blamed the serpent. So *Blame and shame* became a part of human life (and death!).

“Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” *Blaming* is a part of our western world’s morality. [From this point, much of the sermon is based on words from Pastor Gary Morris, formerly of First United Methodist Church in Wausau, currently in Eau Claire.]

We need morality. We need parents to teach it and adults to model it, and *church* should be where you can see it displayed. We need public figures who demonstrate at least some grasp of the concept, and we need a society that rewards moral rather than immoral behavior. For instance, without the moral imperative that honesty is better than lying and cheating, we couldn’t live together with any level of security. Many cultures have developed systems of morality which are a lot alike: affirming honesty, and agreeing that compassion is better than cruelty. And most cultures have some version of the “golden rule”: treat others they way you wish they would treat you. So *morality* is good.

But now hear this: It is not, and has never been, the church’s job to police morality. The most you can say is that the church should be a moral example for the world. As a group, we should be *more* trustworthy, *more* courageous, *more* compassionate than other people. But even that is not the same as saying that we need to crack down on other people’s behavior. Moral behavior should be a *result* of following Christ, but moral behavior is not the goal. When we make it the goal, bad things happen.

(Sermon, page 2)

That's when the church becomes hypocritical. None of us behave morally all the time, so if we're in a church where morality is the goal and the *measure* of faith, we're under great pressure to pretend to be better than we are. Sometimes we pretend so well, we even convince ourselves, and then we become "pious prigs." And if a congregation sees itself as a place for *moral* people, then it becomes judgmental and exclusionary. "That person" is a sinner and can't be one of us.

Even worse, a congregation that's all about *morality* invariably picks and chooses which moral rules they're going to enforce. In America, sexual sins generally get "bonus points" on the judgment meter. In past decades the highlighted sins were often drinking, smoking, card-playing, or dancing. (One Baptist church used to remove people from membership for the sin of "consorting with Methodists!") So you see, when a congregation takes on *morality* as its primary purpose, that changes how it responds to the world outside. That congregation tends to see other people's *sins*, not their humanity. They see "outsiders" not as people in need of Christ, but people in need of *correction*. Or *blame*. Or at least *shame*.

And that's what happened in first century Judaism: being a "good Jew" had become all about morality—keeping the rules—and the Pharisees had become the morality police. They'd taken on the job of determining who was welcome in their worship and who, being a "sinner," was not. This was one of the things that really frustrated the priests about Jesus. They had all these clear lines drawn, and he wouldn't observe them. He associated with "sinners." And that was the thing that most annoyed Jesus about the priests: they seemed to care more about tiny *moral* distinctions and minor laws than about what he called the "weightier matters of the law," like *justice* and *mercy*.

So when Jesus and his disciples pass by the blind beggar, his disciples (who'd been brought up in a faith that was all about morality) asked Jesus the obvious question: **"Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"** They were looking for someone to blame. But Jesus answers, "It doesn't have anything to do with sin. This man was born the way he was so as to demonstrate the power of God." Who sinned sometime in the past is irrelevant. What matter is what happens *now*. Jesus heals the man—another problem for the Pharisees, since it was a sabbath. "Whoever healed this man is a sinner!" they declare. "He broke the sabbath!" And the man who had been given sight says, "Well, I think he's a *prophet!*"

(Sermon, page 3)

Jesus doesn't care about anything except that the man needs help. The man doesn't care who Jesus is; all he knows is that Jesus reached out and touched him, and then he could see.

“Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” The following words are from *Unfolding Light* by Pastor Steve Garnaas-Holmes, March 17, 2020:

“Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him” (John 9:3)

Sooner or later someone is going to say God sent the coronavirus to *punish* somebody (gays, probably, or maybe old people). Baloney!

God is not a guy who does things like that. God is not a guy. God is Love.

Love is not a guy who causes things to happen, like giving you a disease or a mishap or a lottery ticket or a recovery from illness as a test, lesson, punishment, or reward. Love doesn't manipulate, doesn't force you to experience something. Love isn't in the past, settling accounts.

The pure, positive, life-giving energy of love is God. Love doesn't play games. It just blesses, nourishes, provides, connects, delights. In our difficulties Love is with us, suffers with us, gives us energy to prevail. And sometimes that energy overflows in healing. Love's works are revealed in blessing amid brokenness.

Ah! you say. So Love will cure my troubles? No. Love will love you through your troubles. But what good is a god who can't fix things? you ask. A god who suffers our suffering and doesn't stop it?

That is the question, and the answer, of the cross: a God who will not stop crucifixions but be crucified. Such a suffering, forgiving, loving presence is deeply healing, miraculously life-giving. It puts us in touch with the very force of life that causes us to live, to be healthy, to be whole. And it opens our eyes to the work of Love. We are experiencing the coronavirus so that the work of love might be revealed. If our eyes are open, we will reveal it. (end quote) -- May faith in Jesus open *your* eyes to the presence of God/Love in our midst today. Amen.