

Today's gospel reading is one in which Jesus invites us into the story, a reading that is our story. Because of the nature of this gospel passage, we are going to do something very different in this service. **Before** we hear the reading, I would like to share just a few insights with you.

The community to which the Gospel of John is addressed may very well have been expelled from the synagogue for confessing Jesus as Messiah. They may well have felt isolated and abandoned. So, as you experience hearing today's reading, ask yourself how this passage might address the isolated, abandoned experience of John's community?

Not only does this reading address the nature of this early Christian community, it also works to undermine a simplistic understanding of sin. When the disciples voice a common view of the day, referencing disability or hardship as a result of sin, Jesus disagrees. Also, when the Pharisees assume that knowledge of the law automatically grants righteousness, Jesus counters **this** thinking by saying that precisely because they **deny** their sin and **claim** to "see," they are in fact sinning. He says this because "sin" at its most basic level is not recognizing Jesus as God's messiah, the person through whom God is at work to save the world. So, are they the blind ones?

Another aspect for us to ponder is where is the turning point in the story? Is it when the man receives his sight or is it when he confesses his faith?

With these insights in mind, I invite you to listen to this story.

(Begin reader's theater style telling of gospel passage.)

(After the reading, follow with these comments and questions.)

After hearing and experiencing today's gospel, I invite you to think about the following:

- Have you ever felt isolated or abandoned?
- How might Jesus' words and actions in today's story address our feelings when we feel left out or alone?
- How does this story broaden our understanding of both sin and grace?
- Where have we felt blind in our lives?
- Where have we experienced a sense of new sight, new life, a new chance to be and become the person we have always been called to be?

To follow Jesus is to see differently. Sometimes, to follow Jesus is to be brought into a messy situation, maybe even a crisis. But, in the mess, God is doing a new thing. And, to have a conversation with Jesus and follow him is to be opened to newness. Sometimes, this newness means we are blinded when we think we see perfectly. Sometimes, this newness means to be given new sight when we know nothing about blindness.

New sight, new life, a new chance. This blind man was made new. Theologian, Nadia Bolz Weber, writes, “New is often messy. New looks like recovering alcoholics. New looks like reconciliation between family members who don’t actually deserve it. New looks like every time I manage to admit I was wrong and every time I manage to **not** mention when I’m right. New looks like a very fresh start and every act of forgiveness. New is the thing we never saw coming – never even hoped for – like our blind guy here. But new ends up being what I needed all along.”

Such newness is also what we call grace, it is what we call love. Bolz-Weber continues by saying, “God simply keeps reaching down...reaching down into the dirt of your humanity and resurrecting you from the graves you dig for yourself through your violence, your lies, your selfishness, your arrogance, and your addictions. And God keeps loving you back to life over and over....There are times when faith feels like a friendship with God. But there are other times when it feels....I don’t know....more vacant. Yet none of that matters in the end. How **you** feel about Jesus or how close **you** feel to God is meaningless next to how God **acts** upon you. How God indeed enters into your messy life and loves you through it, maybe whether you want God’s help or not.”

In today's story, one of the most remarkable things is the fact that the blind man didn't seek out Jesus or ask his help. Yet, he was healed and made whole in the end. And the powerful, life-giving truth of the gospel is that our suffering, our grief and even our sin will not have the last word. As our souls and bodies desperately cry out for relief, we hear the faint yet clear voice of the Christ calling us; reminding us that, through the cross, death and all its trappings have been swallowed up in victory. The final word rests **not** with suffering and blindness, but with newness, life and peace.

Then we hear the most sublime words imaginable, "Go, wash." And, as the cool and refreshing waters of life wash over us – those baptismal waters in which we daily live – our eyes and our hearts are **opened** to behold the living Christ, standing as the chains of death and hell lay broken at his feet. There is no other response than to raise our voice and cry out at last, "Lord! I believe!"