

March 26, 2017 – Fourth Sunday of Lent
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
John 9:1-41

Looking in the Light

Do you remember the dress that melted the internet? Were you one of the millions of people who saw it? I'm referring to that internet meme of just over a year ago that had all kinds of people weighing in on a dress that was white and gold. Or was it blue and black? All kinds of people weighed in on this: friends, neighbors, celebrities. In the scope of barely any time at all there were so many people looking at it and having something to say about it. What colors it was, how it looked, was cause for great argument.

I think the guy in the gospel story today could identify with that dress. I hope our dramatic reading and staging brought this out: how in the space of a very short time, conversations about this man went from one to another; how he, too, had all kinds of people arguing about him, over him—as over an inanimate object. That's about as much attention the man himself was given; how much what he said was taken into account. Instead, everyone talked over him: Was he the guy who was born blind who used to sit by the side of the road and beg? Or did he just look just like the guy who was born blind who used to sit by the side of road and beg? White and gold, or blue and black?

As it turns out with the dress—which was blue and black, but which I could only see as white and gold—with the dress, the differing perceptions of the colors had to do with the light—the way the light was in the picture posted online, the way light fell on the dress in the picture, but most of all, the way that the eyes of the observer sees light. Perceptions of color depend on with the way an individual's eyes interpret the amount of light in a room—and that is something which varies from person to person.

Again, I am struck by the parallel with today's gospel, with the significance of light, and with the varied perceptions. Jesus self-identification with light introduces the healing. Jesus performs the healing after saying, "I am the light of the world." Jesus says this as an introduction to what he's about to do, as an explanation for what he is about to do: he is going to bring light to someone whose world has been dark since the day he was born.

But that darkness, the man's blindness, was not caused by sin. Jesus is adamant about this. Jesus announces that he is the light of the world because the disciples have just asked him, "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" We've already noted how after he's healed, the man is treated more as a prop than a person. It comes as no surprise, then, that the same was true before he was healed—as the disciples' question illustrates. The disciples' question is only the first in a series of ways in which this man is talked over, itemized, hypothesized. Their question takes the man's painful, personal, human existence, and turns it into a theoretical argument about the origin of suffering.

Jesus has no patience with this. "No, no." Jesus says, "Neither this man sinned, nor his parents." Jesus says, "Disability is not the result of sin." Jesus says, "That's not how it works, and that's not how I work." Jesus spits as he says that, adding emphasis to his point, and getting ready to work, spitting into the dirt, and then grabbing some mud, getting his hands dirty. Jesus is not there to discuss philosophy, he's there to do something. Jesus says, "I'm here to do God's work, to let light shine." And Jesus heals him.

But people can't see it. People can't see how Jesus could have done it. The guy was blind, after all. These people have known him all his life; he's always been like that. How could he be different? He can't be, and be the same guy. And of course the people who are saying this are leaders in the community, respectable, informed people, even his family. Why listen to this poor benighted soul, when his only evidence is his own experience? We may consider their arguments and responses as ridiculous and frivolous as an online firestorm about the colors of a dress. But beneath it all—no, not beneath it, there I am talking over it—through it all is this man, who was born blind, to whom we are blind. Why do internet memes command so much more of our attention than our fellow human beings? Our children, our spouses, our neighbors—most especially our neighbors who are ill, or who are poor, or whose human experience does not fit our informed explanations. So we argue over them.

Jesus heals him. And the man, the man who was born blind, but who can now see all the colors of the spectrum, the man is passed from person to person like an internet meme, like that dress, except the man wasn't able to cash in like the dress designers did with a resulting explosion in sales. Instead in the case of the man, his life gets worse: the argument over him so escalates that they drive him out.

And Jesus goes to find him. After being off stage for most of the drama, in a story thick with absurdity and farce, in a story full of voices rising in volume, at the end there comes this most tender and personal moment: "Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" The man does not even know what it is he is seeing, but he is seeing. He says. "Who?" And "Yes."

There is a Sufi tale of a man, who is bent over on his hands and knees at the market; he is bent over because he is looking for his lost house keys. A friend happens by and joins him on all fours to help with the search. Finally the friend asks, "Where exactly did you last see your keys?" The man replies, "In my house." "Then why," asks the friend, "are we looking out here?" "Because," says the man, "it's too dark in the house."

Where do we look for things that are lost? Where they are lost? Or where we want to look? Jesus looks for the lost, where they are lost. That's where Jesus looked for us. And found us. And opened our eyes. And he is all the light we need to see.