

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

I was watching a show yesterday in which group of adult friends showed up at a high school soccer match to cheer on the daughter of their friend who was being scouted by a college coach. They were super obnoxious in their support, booing the referees and calling out teammates who made mistakes. It was all done for comic effect, so it was a little exaggerated, and a lot cringey. You know the dynamic, I think. If you're rooting for your team you tend to see things in a way that favors them. You see the fouls against them, but not the ones they commit. And the same thing happens in politics, especially in recent years. We've become super polarized, so that "our" guys can do no wrong. And then when they mess up in ways that can't be denied, we figure out how to explain it away, or "what about" the opposing side. We create a picture in our heads of how we think the world ought to be, and then point fingers when reality doesn't cooperate.

It's this same kind of dynamic that is playing out in our Gospel reading this morning. And actually, it has been playing out in the two previous week's readings as well. You could say it's a thread running through John's Gospel. Nicodemus came as a religious leader, maybe threatened by Jesus, maybe curious, maybe both. He's used to a certain way of understanding God and Jesus turns things upside down on him. Then there's the Samaritan woman at the well. She didn't come looking for Jesus, and is surprised that he deems her worthy of being spoken too, and that he would be willing to drink from her water jar. He's already breaking the rules – the rules of his people, and probably hers as well. But when she asks whose rules are right, he surprises her again by claiming that neither set of rules is what is most important. What's important is getting connected to God in spirit and in truth.

Now today we've got a theological question from Jesus' disciples, based on long-held assumptions about who God is and how God operates. In this case it's the assumption that sickness and disability are signs of God's disfavor, drawn from the depths of our innate religious sense that if something bad happens to us, well there must be something we did to deserve it. This is what the disciples think they know about God. And as we read on, we learn that it is also what the Pharisees think they know about God. There has to be someone to blame.

But once again, Jesus is not interested in playing that game. Blame ties people to their pasts, and Jesus is not interested in keeping people in their pasts. Jesus wants to meet people in their present so that he can open for them a new and better future. And with this man born blind he does that in an act of new creation. He makes mud, spreads it on the man's eyes, and sends him to wash in the pool called "sent," which is what Siloam means. This act is loaded with meaning. Just as John's prolog reenacted the first creation story from Genesis 1, so John here harkens back to the second creation story in Genesis 2, where God fashioned the first person out of the dust of the ground. And just as the stories of Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman were full of baptismal imagery, so is this story. The man emerges from the pool, and his life is changed. He is a new man, so that those who knew him before aren't sure it's really him, only someone "like him."

This should be the end of the story. The next sentence should be, "and they lived happily ever after." But no. It cannot work this way. It cannot be so easy. As I said earlier, the Pharisees know how things work. But also, I forgot to remind you, whenever there is a story about Pharisees and you don't identify yourself with the Pharisees, you might be missing the point. Sorry for complicating this. So, the Pharisees know that God punishes sins. And they know that where there is punishment – and what else could congenital blindness be? – there must be sin, just

like where there's smoke, there's fire. So, they launch an investigation and hear the man's account of what happened to him. And immediately they face a conundrum: this happened on a Sabbath when it is forbidden to do any work. They know that anyone sent from God would not break the law. But they also know that only someone sent from God could give sight to someone who was blind from birth. So they are divided.

Now, have you noticed so far how much the Pharisees "know"? How much they are sure of? By contrast, the man born blind, and his parents too when they are questioned, are willing to say what they don't know. The man doesn't know if Jesus is a sinner, he only knows that he was blind and now he can see, and that Jesus did it. The parents don't know how their son now sees, or who cured him, they only know that he is their son, and that he was born blind. But all of them, the Pharisees, the man, and his parents, are still imbedded in the logic of their tradition. The Pharisees, or at least the ones who are still talking, cannot abandon the blame game. It works for them, keeps them in control. And so they argue in favor of Jesus being a sinner, and not from God. The man, who can't deny what happened to him, argues in favor of Jesus being a prophet. And his parents probably agree, though they are afraid to speak up. And maybe there are Pharisees who also agree, but who are likewise afraid to say so. Nicodemus, who came to Jesus by night, could be one of them, if he was there. We don't know. But the upshot is that even though the man seems to win the argument with the Pharisees, he does not change their minds, and it is he who gets thrown out. But for both sides, their knowledge and their reasoning only get them so far.

It is only when Jesus finds the man again and reveals his true identity to him, that the man's new future is really opened to him, and he goes from being an outcast to being a follower and a worshipper of Jesus. And I know I'm running out of time, but I need to tell you what happens next. This was already a really long reading – one of the longest we ever get – but to really get what has happened in this story we need to continue into the next chapter. That's John chapter 10, the Good Shepherd chapter. The next thing Jesus says is that he is the shepherd whose sheep hear his voice and they follow him out of the fold to pasture. I think that's why we have the 23rd psalm today. And that is just what has happened in chapter 9. The man who had been born blind heard Jesus' voice and followed him. Sheep can't live their lives in a fold. That's for protection only, to keep them safe at night. To live and thrive they need to be led out to the fields to feed, and they need a shepherd to lead them.

So where does that leave us Pharisees? Remember, I said we need to identify with the Pharisees or we'll miss the point. The Pharisaic instinct is to rely on the law and our reasoning about the law above all else. It is to cling to tradition for tradition's sake, rather than letting tradition be an anchor that keeps us grounded in what is important. The Pharisaic instinct is to game the system and use it for selfish advantage, and to weaponize it against people we don't like, especially those are different from us. But the law and tradition and self-interest were never the goal of life. They were only ever the sheep fold, good for their intended purposes, but not where we're meant to live.

At the end of our reading, Jesus says, effectively that Pharisees are the ones who have turned out to be blind. And that's a bummer if you're a Pharisee. But the good news for Pharisees is what Jesus does with blind people. He opens our eyes. He calls us to the waters of baptism, into his death and resurrection, and out of those waters brings new creation, liberation from our past, and from the powers of sin, death and evil. And then he leads us into green pastures, into life that is really life. May it be so. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and our mind in Christ Jesus. Amen.