

Sermon – John 9:1-41
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Grace Lutheran Church
4 Lent – Year A
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“Whom Should We Blame?”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. Inspired by Italians singing together on their balconies, our block in Oak Park has started singing together each night at 7:00. Thank goodness, because when we take our daily walk through the neighborhood it seems as if we're the only residents who haven't yet been raptured. But at 7:00 p.m. we emerge, blinking in the fading light of the sun, all at the same time. We keep our distance but it's a glorious moment. Yesterday was Bach's birthday, but our song for the day came from another great composer whose name starts with B: Bon Jovi. I'll give you a moment to chuckle at home. We sang the rock group's chart-topping anthem, "Livin' on a Prayer." Belting out the chorus in my best karaoke voice, singing words I've known by heart for more than 30 years, I heard the lyrics in a new way. Halfway through the chorus we sang, "Take my hand, we'll make it I swear." Take my hand. What do we yearn to do in uncertain, anxious, frightful times? Reach out to one another; hold on to each other. But COVID-19's effects are everywhere. The one thing we neighbors couldn't do while we sang these words? Take each other by the hand. Other than the people with whom we are sheltering in place, we are not allowed to touch one another. To gather close together. To shake hands, high five, embrace. Suddenly, when we need one another the most, we are forced to be apart.
2. I'm finding that you notice different things in the midst of a global pandemic. Our gospel today is about receiving sight, but it's the physicality involved that

strikes me today. To be sure, the way in which Jesus heals the man born blind has always struck me as odd. Jesus spits on the ground, makes mud out of the dirt, and spreads the mud on the man's eyes. What once sounded odd now sounds wonderful: Jesus, reaching into the man's darkness and touching him. The hands of the God who stretched the heavens now incarnate in this Jesus, *these* hands reach into the mud and pull this man into sight, into light and life. Touch. What a powerful, transformative thing. It is what we yearn for now more than ever, now that we have so much less of it. I know that you are watching, that we are together in the Spirit, that there are bonds between us that cannot be broken. But what I want is to have you here, sitting in your self-assigned pews. Here, adding your voice to the small choir comprised of Pastor Costello and myself. Here, coming forward so that I can put the body and blood of Christ into your outstretched hands, our own hands connecting in that moment. I did not know how much these physical connections mean to me. This virus is teaching us so much. I am learning not to take our actual, physical, incarnate togetherness for granted.

3. While there is nothing good that I can see about the novel coronavirus, nevertheless God is surely at work in this time, opening our eyes to that which matters most. Like everyone in this story other than Jesus and the man born blind, we have been living with blinders on. The disciples see the man not as a person but as a condition. And not a condition to alleviate, but one in which they see a theological problem to be solved. Who sinned, they ask, this man or his parents that he was born blind? Seeing a problem, they look for a cause instead of a solution. Whose fault is this, Jesus? We do the same all the time. Faced with challenges or disease, our inner voices whisper, "You deserve this." Confronted by obstacles or disappointment, we blame those around us. Living in the midst of a pandemic, some are more interested in placing blame than they are in looking for a solution or helping those in need. Faced with suffering, we look in the rearview mirror for someone to blame, even if its ourselves. It's the story of the garden all over again. Caught in the

act by the God who simply wanted to be with them, Adam blames Eve and Eve blames the serpent. We do well, of course, to learn from the mistakes we make. But not all suffering has a cause. Never mind that such idle theologizing and blame-casting are tools to keep our fellow humans and their suffering at bay.

4. Jesus isn't having it. Not then, and not today. Jesus proclaims that neither the man nor his parents sinned. Jesus, it seems, is not that interested in what these people did in the past. He's much more interested in what God is about to do in the present. God in Christ is about to illustrate what he proclaimed earlier, that he is the light of the world, and that whoever follows him will never walk in darkness. The people in the story who can see have a hard time seeing this for what it is. They don't recognize their own sinfulness, preferring to speculate upon the sufferings of others. But the man born blind? He knows what real blindness is and so he knows what a gift it is to see. So it is for us in our veiled sight, our suffering. We do not know how long we will be apart from one another, how great the suffering will be, which of us will be infected. We do not know how long we'll be walking in this shadowy valley, but the Shepherd walks with us. God is not the cause of this coronavirus, but God is at work in the midst of it. God is giving us new vision. The same Jesus who got his hands dirty to open our eyes, the same Christ who died that we could live, is at work in our lives today. Training us to see beyond our present suffering to the other side. But not just so that we can return to normal; if all we get back to is the world as we knew it a few weeks ago, we've missed some lessons the Spirit would have us learn.
5. When Jesus heals the man, he doesn't just restore his sight; he teaches him to see. In these early days of the pandemic, we have seen, I think, a glimpse of the Kingdom that will one day come. A Kingdom in which low-wage grocery store workers are suddenly seen for what they always have been: essential human beings. A Kingdom in which health is not a commodity to be hoarded

by the fortunate but something we desire for all people, something for which we will work together. A Kingdom in which humans are so highly valued that doctors and nurses are literally putting their own lives on the line to provide treatment. A Kingdom in which people are not objects to rush past but individuals who share our common story, and that kindness and grace and the only ways to interact. Our interactions are too few these days to waste on meanness, our humanity too shared to retreat into selfishness. We are learning that finding someone to blame is a lot less important than finding someone to help, to bless, to love. Jesus did not open our eyes so that we could see the old world better. Jesus opens our eyes so that we can see the light of the new world shining even now, and so that we would be set ablaze with the glory of God, beacons pointing to God and offering hope.

6. We don't know yet how long this dark time will last, nor can we say how long we will live apart from one another. But it will not last forever. Jesus is God with his hands in the dirt and the mud of our sin and suffering. He opens our eyes to see God's glory revealed in the cross by which that sin and suffering is now dealt with. Now, he is opening our eyes to see in new ways. When this time ends, I can promise you that on our first Sunday back together, we're going to blow off the roof as we lift our voices in praise. Even that will be but the faintest foretaste of the vision yet to be revealed, when we will be not only on the other side of a pandemic, but finally – by God's grace alone – on the other side of sin and death, where nothing for all eternity can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, or any of God's people from one another. In that promise, by that hope, we are connected even now. Open your eyes, friends, for this darkness cannot dim the brightness of God's Son. With open eyes, open your hands, and find ways to touch and bless the world. Don't find someone to blame. Find someone to help. For Jesus' sake. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.