

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Every time I read this particular event in the Gospel new light bulbs start popping in my head.... So, if my remarks today seem somewhat disjointed, forgive me, but there is just so much here.

First of all there is the assumption of the disciples that it was sin—either that of his parents or his own—that caused this blind beggar his sight. I can't tell you how many times I've encountered this attitude. Parents whose child makes a wrong turn in life, perhaps becoming an alcoholic or addicted to drugs, ask, "What did we do wrong?" A divorced spouse wondering, "What might I have done to save my marriage?" Most painfully, is a child whose parents separate, thinking that somehow his or her behavior or misbehavior caused the breaking up of their family. We still have a hard time accepting that sometimes bad things happen to really good people.

Jesus' reply to the disciples: "Neither he nor his parents sinned; it is so that the works of God might be made visible through him", set off another light bulb in my head. It got me to thinking, would we ever have experienced the musical genius of a Stevie Wonder or a Ray Charles if they hadn't been born blind? Have we ever thought that our own limitations or illnesses are opportunities "so that the works of God might be made visible through us"? This thought became even more personal. Do I see these painful tumors in my leg or the injections I have to get in my eye every few months as opportunities so that the works of God might be made visible through me? This led me to pray that it might be so.

The next amazing thing that happens in this encounter is when Jesus "spat on the ground and made clay with the saliva, and smeared the clay on his eyes, and said to him, 'Go wash in the Pool of Siloam...'" Jesus could have healed him just by his word or his touch. Instead, he spits on the ground, makes mud, and smears it on the man's eyes, and then tells him to go wash it off. Why all the drama?

To me the spit and the dirt seem to represent the conjoining of the Creator with the created, which, when they are brought into harmony, bring wholeness. It reminded me of the prayer that I say during the Offertory of the Mass, as I mix a little water with the wine that is to be consecrated: "By the mystery of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity." Isn't that awesome, in every Mass we pray to share in the divinity of Christ, to become, that is, like God Himself, as surely as he shares in our humanity?

Now, did you happen to notice that this blind beggar never even asked Jesus to heal him, to give him his sight? It never even occurred to him that he would ever see because he had been born that way. That's all he ever knew.

We do that all the time. We just stick with what we know, no matter how painful, no matter how much of our lives we waste, never expecting things will ever get better. Too few of us live with an expectant faith that our God is a God of surprises who will work in our lives; act in our lives, when we least expect. Are we open to accepting these graces when they come our way?

It was the gratuitous act of Jesus to make the mud and smear it on the man's eyes. Then he requires a response on the part of the blind beggar, "Go," he says, "wash in the Pool of Siloam". What if the man had said, "Get off me! Leave me alone!". Wouldn't that be the reaction of most of us, but not this man. He obeyed. It was only after he obeyed that his sight came to him.

Doesn't that speak to all of us? In the troubled times of our lives; in our brokenness, our weaknesses, our illnesses, and, yes, in our sinfulness, we will find healing and wholeness if we are obedient to the word of God, spoken both in the Scriptures, but also in the deepest places of our own hearts, where the Spirit of God waits to speak to us.

Now, the real drama of the encounter unfolds; people's inability to accept that this filthy, blind beggar is healed. He can see! Don't we often have difficulty with that---that people really can change? Alcohols and drug addicts can recover. People imprisoned for crimes can become productive, valuable employees. Children generally do grow up—some sooner than others.

Now, the Pharisees seem kind of like the villains of this story. They challenge the blind man; they challenge his parents; they challenge Jesus Himself. But they weren't bad people. Contrary to popular belief, the Pharisees were the progressive party among Orthodox Jews. Their teachings were closer to that of Jesus than were those of the Sadducees. The name "Pharisee" comes from the Hebrew word, "Perushim", which means "separated". They were brave and faithful men who were determined to maintain their distinctiveness as Jews when foreign conquerors attempted to compromise the Jewish faith by introducing their own customs and worship. The Pharisees lived in strict accord with the sacred writings, as well as the oral tradition of their faith. Most of them were good, solid, respectable people trying to live out their faith in a culture that was continually being corrupted by pagan thought and practice. Their zealotry for their religion determined how they dressed, washed, ate, fasted, observed the Sabbath, as well as kept themselves clean from all manner of defilement.

However, this all-in commitment to the law produced a kind of spiritual blindness. They saw only what agreed with their faith. To everything else and to everyone else, they were blind. It seems to me that there are more than a few Christians today who suffer from similar spiritual blindness. There are zealous Christians of every stripe who see themselves as strict adherents to the will and way of Christ, but are blind in so many ways to authentic discipleship.

Let's consider for a moment some of the ways the Pharisees were blind and see if any of them relate to us. Pharisees lived by the letter of the law, but were blind to the spirit of the law. For instance, they were so afraid of working on the Sabbath that there was a law stating that if a person fractured a bone, they could not have it attended to on the Sabbath. A mother couldn't even wrap the broken or sprained arm or leg of her child without incurring their wrath for such an offense of the law.

In their zeal to honor the Sabbath, the Pharisees lost sight of the fact that the Sabbath was created for people's benefit, not to be a crushing, heartless burden to them.

We have to be so careful about that in the Church, don't we? We need to show the benefit of being Church, not see it as merely a burden or an obligation. We come together as Church, not to burden each other, but to share each other's burdens. We have to get the message out that the joy, the love, the friendship we share as a Christian community lightens the burdens we all have to carry.

I tend to grade myself on that scale. If I think that anyone leaves here on a weekend not feeling a little bit better about himself or herself; if you leave here without feeling more hopeful, more joyful, or even challenged to do a little better, be a little better, I haven't done my job well. But, that is as true of you, as it is of me. Each of you has that same responsibility to each other. Someone should leave this building tonight feeling better because of something that you said or you did.

The Pharisees made another fatal error. They used religion to divide people rather than draw them together. But, to be fair, they had a dilemma. They faced the difficulty of being a minority faith in a pluralistic culture. We can appreciate this difficulty if we consider the discomfort of parents of Jewish or Muslim children when we celebrate Christmas. How can a 5 year old resist Christmas. It is a problem being a minority faith in a pluralistic culture.

While we can sympathize with the Pharisees, they went too far. For instance, the law required them to wash their entire body before eating, not for sanitation, but because if even the shadow of a Gentile fell across them on the street, they would be defiled. This practice of their faith bred in them a terrible prejudice against outsiders. That's why they took such offense at him and saw Jesus as an infidel because he couldn't possibly be a good Jew since he actually sat at the same table and ate with sinners and tax collectors.

We have to ask ourselves if we have made the same mistake. Are there people in our community or even in our families who somehow have gained the mistaken notion that they are not good enough to worship with us? Is there something that we may have said or done or an attitude that we've conveyed that suggests to someone he or she is not welcome here?

Recently I encountered a man in confession who had been away from the Church for over thirty years. He left the Church that would not allow his father a funeral and a burial because he had committed suicide. When he and his family were in their most dire need we were not there for them. It made me so angry. I apologized to him and told him that all those years away from the Church was not his sin, it was mine, standing in the place of the priest who had been so hurtful, so uncaring, upholding a dubious "law" with no regard for the suffering of the people effected. I begged his forgiveness and God's forgiveness for this sin of the Church, this sin of a priest, and now my sin. We can never lose sight of who we really are. The Church is not a museum for saints. It is a hospital for sinners.

Another blindness on the part of the Pharisees is that they cared more about their principles than they did about people. That's why it was easy for them to allow an innocent man to die on a cross. Jesus certainly wasn't the only victim of excessive religious zeal. Many have been and are being put to death in the name of religion. Dare I say that every religion in human history has been afflicted with this terrible blindness. Let it be forever established that it can never be right to kill in the name of God. Can we be so blind that we cannot see that God loves all his children—be they black or brown or white; Christian, Muslim, Jew, or Hindu.

Faith has been prostituted to excuse all kinds of indifference to human need. Such faith is diametrically opposed to the heart and mind of Jesus. Yet there are Catholics and other Christians who are fanatically devoted to the Christian religion, yet are totally blind to the will of God as made manifest in Jesus Christ. That is the message of this Gospel encounter with Christ. He came into the world to save people—all people. Everything else in our religion pales in significance to this one truth.

Jesus Christ came into the world that we may see the greatness of God's love—for you, for me, for a filthy blind beggar, and for every other person in this world. The Pharisees asked, "Surely we are not also blind, are we?" The answer is, "YES! ABSOLUTELY YES!" If you cannot see that the whole purpose of religion is to connect people with one another and with God, yes, you are blind. If you use religion to divide people rather than to bring them together, yes, you are blind; if you care more about your principles than you do about people, then, yes, you are blind.

The Pharisees persisted in their spiritual blindness, even as it was evident that Jesus had the power to heal the blind beggar. What about you? Will you persist in your spiritual blindness when it comes to God's love for all people? Or will you allow the very essence of Jesus touch you in these common elements of bread and wine and water that become his Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity in this Eucharist to open your hearts to all people—those sitting beside you, in front of you, and behind you; black and white and brown; Muslim, Jew, Protestant, Hindu; even Democrat and Republican—all God's children. Will you allow Him to open your eyes to not only see them all as your sisters and brothers, but also treat them with the same love that you have for your own family?