

I have braved the grocery store *once* in the midst of all of this. Once. And I didn't even want to do it then, however, I figured that if we were hunkering down for a pandemic, I probably needed to be able to wash my hair during that time, and one kind of needs shampoo and conditioner to do that, and so...begrudgingly, I anxiously trudged to Food Lion in the hopes of getting in and getting out with my tiny little handful of things that I needed without incident. I went in quickly grabbed my things and mentally tossed a coin in the air of which of the insanely long lines would get me out of the store the fastest. But as I was standing there, waiting, something very small, but what in the moment felt kind of incredible happened.

Every line is jam packed full of people, lines backed up into the aisles, but in the line next to me there was a cart that was next up to check out that did not have a person with it. Eventually, a girl darted out from one of the aisles and hopped back in line next to the previously abandoned cart, where she then let out a litany of thanks to the woman behind her for letting her hop of line to grab a few more things, rather than drag her full cart out of line and restart the interminable process all over. The woman behind her was kind, gracious, sweet...she said you're welcome and just let things keep going as though what had just happened was the most natural thing in the world. And it probably should be...but as I watched it play out, all I could think of was that this is not usually how our world works. Usually, we are all in too much of a hurry, worried about our own time, our own schedule to have any tolerance for a tiny thing like letting someone hop out of line and holding their spot. More often than not, our focus is on eight hundred billion other things and we don't have the time, the focus, the attention, the willingness to focus on the thing right in front of us, particularly if that thing in front of us is the needs of our neighbor. There are just way more important things to focus on, and nothing else matters.

Our gospel lesson this morning is microcosm of people just absolutely focusing on a million other things besides *the point* of what has happened right in front of them, of everyone in this story not being able to see the forest for the trees of their own opinions, thoughts, fears, and attitudes about what has played out in the life of this one guy who has had his entire life changed by Jesus all because of a little mud and spit...which, gross, but you know sometimes we can't control how the gospel comes to us.

So what is the point? What is the focus here? You have this man, this man who has been blind since the day he was born, and because of that has had his life rendered basically meaningless in the context of the world he lives in. He has no job, no community, nothing really other than the hours he spends begging on the street corners, hoping that anyone will be willing to help him. It's not that there haven't been people around him, no, no, everyone seems to recognize him as that blind man who usually is begging down by the pool, but no one seems to actually *care* about him. They've seen him begging, but it doesn't seem like anyone has been willing to help whatsoever. Even his parents seem kind of out of the picture, if their son has been reduced to begging, it doesn't seem as though they're super on board with the helping him in the midst of his struggles. Into the complete and total chaos and heartbreak of this man's situation comes Jesus, who doesn't ask any questions, doesn't even really talk to this guy much, just decides, I'm going to give you your sight and your life back. Just like that, in the blink of an eye, this man's life is restored. He can see again, which opens up his life to so many new possibilities and opportunities. He can work, he can be with people, he can operate in the world on his own. He's been given his *life* back by Jesus. That's it. That's the focus. One man's life entirely changed and restored because of Jesus.

But does anyone want to actually talk about that? Nope. Not even remotely close. The disciples start in on it before Jesus even heals

him. Hey Jesus, this guy, whose sin made him blind? They don't seem to care at all for what Jesus is about to do for this man, they want to talk about the cause of why his life is like this, because he's a sinner or his parents are. Jesus is about to do something amazing!! Don't care, let's talk about sin and consequences. Then you have the Pharisees who turn this into an issue about just about everything, from the Sabbath to who God listens to, from sin to who actually has power in God's kingdom. They drag this man and his parents through a literal *trial* trying to get down to the facts about just what Jesus did, how he did it, why he did it, when he did it. They don't care that this man has been healed, they don't care about his life, they want to know how they can use this as an opportunity to turn people against Jesus and finally get the evidence they need to destroy him. Even this guy's parents who get dragged into this mess are just like, hard pass, nope. He's old enough to answer your questions, don't ask us, we weren't there, we don't know what happened, we're out of here. They know the consequences of speaking up for their son, they could get kicked out of the synagogue so you aren't going to find them ecstatic and excited about their son's healing.

Not a single person in *forty one verses* cares one ounce about what has actually happened to this man. No one asks him how he is, what he's going to do now, how it feels to be healed. No one celebrates with him. No one even musters up an awed *wow* at what has happened. The miracle of his life has become an excuse for a lot of frustrating and meaningless conversation, when really the only thing anyone should care about is that this man has been given his life back. It gets so bad that even Jesus *comes back* to help this guy deal with how things have been going, and the Pharisees are just completely oblivious. Jesus tells them that *they* are the blind ones, entirely missing the point, and they look around and go, "What? Us? Surely, *we* aren't blind!" And that right there is where this gospel rises up to meet us.

Because I will confess to you all that that is one of my fears, in the midst of so very many fears at the moment. My fear is that when all of this is over, and yes, it will be over at some point, all of this focus that we have right now on love and gracefulness and support and kindness and patience will disappear, and we will look back on however long this lasts and we will start focusing on all the wrong things. We will look back with tinted hindsight that makes us cranky and frustrated and we will seek to place blame and hurt where it doesn't belong, and suddenly those tiny pockets of hope that we have been finding over the last few days and weeks, like being allowed to jump out of line at the grocery store, will fade, and we will all sink back into our cynicism and our individualism and our angst with the world, and we won't recognize or focus on the ways in which this whole messy, awful situation could change our hearts, how we treat each other, how we see each other, how we hold each other's thoughts and experiences, how we are human together.

I don't know how the next few weeks are going to play out. I wish I did...for my own sanity and for your own, but what I do know is this. Over the next couple of weeks, we're all going to experience Jesus, our faith, our life in the church differently. It's going to feel different for all of us and we're all going to grapple with it in vast and various ways. My hope and prayer for all of us is that we are able to hold each other's experiences as sacred and holy, even if they're different from our own. The temptation is always going to be to focus on the wrong thing when we hear about how someone else has experienced Jesus, to do what the Pharisees did and say no, no that's not what this is about, that's not how God works, let me tell you how it really is. And then proclaim that we aren't the ones who are blind to how God is moving in the world!

May we resist that temptation...may we instead be able to step back and look at our siblings and simply go, wow...God has totally changed your life, changed your day, changed this very second...and

that is a miracle. May we resist the temptation to define how Jesus works for others, may we live into the grace of loving each other in the midst of a world gone crazy. May this be a time when we can actually sit back and gaze in wonder at how amazing it is that faith moves so differently for all of us and yet still somehow calls us into the same space to live and pray and worship and be together as a church, because that is a miracle. We don't all have to do it the same way...but we do it together...united by Christ who reaches us all differently, which is amazing.

People of God, may our focus, not just today, not just for these next few weeks, but for always be how amazing it is that God moves among us, how amazing it is that God loves us, how amazing it is that we get to love and care for each other in the midst of our best and our worst times. May we focus on hope, on life, on small graces like ducking out of line at the grocery store. My hope for all of us can be summed up by something I read on Facebook the other day: "When this is over, may we never again take for granted a handshake with a stranger, full shelves at the store, conversations with neighbors, a crowded theater, Friday night out, the taste of communion, a routine checkup, the school rush each morning, coffee with a friend, the stadium roaring, each deep breath, a boring Tuesday, life itself. When this ends may we find that we have become more like the people we wanted to be, we were called to be, we hoped to be, and may we stay that way—better for each other because of the worst." People of God, may we focus on the miracles...in our own lives and in the lives of our siblings. May we fight the urge to argue and challenge, but simply to say how amazing, God is still moving in your life, in my life, even in the grocery store. **AMEN!!!**