

Before we begin, I want you to take a moment to think about one thing that you know well enough to teach someone else. It doesn't need to be complicated or involved, and I'm not trying to say that it is the only thing or the most important thing you know. I just want it to be something that you feel competent in and something that you are comfortable sharing with others.

For me, this is one of the most difficult stories to preach on. And yet, it is one of the stories that I might be most qualified to talk with you about, but there is the difficulty. I could talk with you about this text for the next day or so and not run out of material and never get to the good news. So, let me say from the beginning that this text is not about a blind guy. It is all about identity, community, and acceptance.

Let us begin. At the beginning of this story, the identity of the person born blind is firmly established. He has a family. He has a job, that is, begging, and he has a community, the other professional beggars sanctioned by Scripture. His identity is that of the blind beggar. It is not an identity that people are going to study for, but he is recognized by his community and welcomed there. Wherever he would go to beg, he would be known and welcomed. He is one of a number of people who are permitted by Mosaic law to beg. Indeed, God's people are commanded to share their alms with those who have the right to beg. Because he is an adult, he has probably been begging for years. He has made enough money at this job to support or help support himself and his family.

Although he is to be supported by the alms of the people, and is mentioned favorably in Leviticus 19:14, "Do not revile the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind. You shall fear your God! I am the Lord," he is not allowed into the synagogue. As this story begins he is outside of the synagogue with his own identity. What happens next is that this man's entire identity changes in a matter of moments. Afterwards this man who was formerly blind loses everything that has meant anything to him. His status in the community changes—those around him, his neighbors and others, challenge whether he is the same person or someone who looks like him amid his protestations of claiming to be the same person he used to be.

He is challenged by the synagogue court, brought before the Pharisees, and questioned about this new life he is leading. He is challenged to prove that he was not sighted before. At last his parents are brought before the synagogue, and, in fear, they turn away from their son and make him speak for himself since, as a sighted person, he is able to enter the synagogue.

Finally, after further questioning, the man is cast out of the synagogue, the synagogue he was not able to be part of before, and he sits outside the synagogue destitute. He has no identity. He has no profession. He has no community. He has no family. He has this gift of new vision, but no one to share it with. No one to share it with until Jesus finds this man again.

This story, which has most oftentimes been preached as this amazing miracle, a story of celebration, may be one of the greatest struggles in and of the Scriptures. As Jacob's confrontation at the Jabbok river with God, that great wrestling match back in Genesis, resulted in a change in Jacob's identity, so now the man who was formerly blind has a new identity. Jacob's wrestling match changes his name from Jacob to Israel for he wrestled with God, and he carried the limp from his hip being dislocated for the rest of his life. This man will wrestle with seeing for the rest of his life, and yet he is never named. So, what is this story about?

As I said, I do not believe that this story is about the man born blind. It is all about identity, community, and acceptance. Further, I believe that this story is for us today and challenges us in all kinds of ways. Again, let us begin.

I cannot think of a time when we, that is the Church, have been challenged in our identity the way we are being challenged today. The old days of being able to be the moral compass of our communities, of being places where we could quietly study the Bible and get baptized, confirmed, married, and buried are gone. The days of living in a world where people assumed that everybody is Christian and that we lived in a Christian world (an illusion we often carry), are gone. The days of living quietly in our own corner of the world without concern for what is happening in other parts of the world is long time gone.

I tell you today, Christ is standing before us, mixing up the stuff of creation, God's spit and dirt, forming us into a new Adam, a new community, with new ways of living. This is the world of artificial joints and limbs; heart transplants, kidney transplants and even lung transplants. We are living in a cyber-world that not only allows instant communication, but demands it. We live in a world that not only doesn't care about the poor among us, it brags about creating systems that will continue to deprive the poorest of the poor of their very dignity. The days of food baskets anonymously showing up on our neighbors' doorsteps as they did so many times in the midst of the Great Depression are long gone.

It is time for us to have our eyes opened. It is time to wrestle with the disapproval of those around us. It is time to even leave our families for the vision of God's possibility kingdom before us. It will not be easy. But when it is all said and done, the one who searches out the outcasts will find us too, and that one will reveal himself to us, reminding us that we have met before, and that we will be able to walk together with a new identity received in the new life given to us in baptism, in the relationship with new eyes to see God's work in the world, shaped from clay in his image, and claimed as children of God.

It has been many years since Daniel Berrigan said this, but his words are still true today. "The mark of a Christian is that you must look good on wood." We are called, gathered, and challenged to see the world around us—to see the world around us with all of its sores and scabs, and then we are sent into that world to be the body of Christ for our neighbors, to be the ones who will stand before the outcasts of the world with words of encouragement and acceptance.

We are the ones who can offer the purifying waters of Siloam to a mud-covered, thirsty world that it might be sent with the living waters of endurance and hope, with the character of Christ and the anointing of the Holy Spirit. It is a hope that gives new identity. It is a hope that comes with pain. It is a hope that depends on and builds new communities of faith. It is a hope that accepts the gifts we have been given and uses them.

The man born blind receives his sight so that we might see. He suffers the challenges of that world so that we might know that there is life beyond rejection. He wrestles with his seeing and shows us the way to true vision in the one who makes all things possible, Jesus Christ, our Lord and savior. No, this story is not about the man born blind, it is about us today, the people of _____ Lutheran Church. You did not ask for it, but Jesus, while he was passing, stooped down and opened your eyes. What do you see? What are you going to do about it?

Again, let us begin. Remember that thing that you know well enough to teach? When are you going to start teaching it? How can we help you make that happen?