

From John's gospel, Jesus said, I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind. Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said, 'surely we are not blind, are we?'

It is the Fourth Sunday in Lent, which I am sure you noticed immediately because of the rose vestments. I suspect they are hard to miss. I have joked with you before that we look resplendent in rose, not pretty in pink! Though beyond them, there is more than just the brief color change; there is deeper meaning for it all.

There are several names for the fourth Sunday of Lent, the most common being *Laetere* Sunday. *Laetere* means rejoice, and it was the opening on this day to the Mass centuries ago: *Rejoice o Jerusalem*. It was meant to be an encouragement during Lent. Rejoice because Easter is getting closer! Rejoice because Lent is half way over. I always thought that sounded crass: rejoice that Lent is half way over. But it came from a time when everyone was fasting all during Lent... the whole community was fasting, probably something we can't really imagine.

Not here. But back then everyone was fasting and they had a day of reprieve, a day of encouragement. *Rejoice*, they said, *the fast is halfway over*.

I'm not sure if this resonates with us the way it must have resonated with them. So many people I know have given up on fasting anyway, outside the church of course, but also within the church. And maybe they are right. *It seemed silly not to eat chocolate*, they say, *like that was doing any good*. Maybe they were right. I like to think that it still does some good, as people who have absolutely everything in life, to be intentional in not having everything, at least not absolutely everything.

And today, in many ways, trying not to have everything actually sets us apart from the crowd. It occurs to me that today, the half-way point of Lent, was once holy because the whole community fasted and everyone needed a break, but for most of us that isn't true. If you are fasting or taking on some kind of intention, it really puts you outside of the crowd for once, for a little while. And it gives you perspective on life and on spiritual

endeavors, but it probably distances you from the crowd, and the danger is that you might find it difficult to return to the crowd when it is all over.

This dynamic is at play, I think, in our gospel reading today. *What does it mean to be part of the crowd or to be separate from it? How does that help us or keep us from finding Christ?*

There are certainly many things at work in this gospel reading. You have the healing of a blind man, who seems at first simply to be objectified. For the disciples, it was a question of sin, but Jesus said no, people don't get sick or live with infirmity because of sin. I suspect any who suffer with an illness take consolation in that!

You have the Pharisees who are much more concerned about the unauthorized healer and his unlawful timing than they are that a blind man can see. They missed out on seeing the work of God in their midst, which is sad for insightful religious people, and obviously ironic in the reading. You have the crowds, who honestly seem

not even to recognize the blind man once he is healed. They keep asking each other whether or not that is the man. Think about how satirical that is... they saw him every day as a beggar, but now they don't recognize him. They are like children who run into their teachers at the grocery store and simply cannot believe that the teacher left school and went to the grocery store.

And you have the parents, not competing for any parent of the year awards. They seem more concerned about themselves and keeping up appearances than they care that their son can see. Think how often they must have prayed, *dear God, if only my son could see!* And you have the blind man who goes from simple and objectified to wise and prophetic. From utter simplicity to elegant truth. It really is a rich text. It is a comedy of errors in many ways. and it confronts us in a way that is both comic and tragic, asking what we see and don't see.

In the end, after all this has played out, there is a question, a rhetorical question, that hangs there: *we aren't blind are we?* It is hard being apart from the

crowd and returning to it. Spiritual perspective might change how you see the world. *We aren't blind are we?*

Look a terrible fate of the man born blind. After he confronts the Pharisees with how he has been healed and transformed and has moved from utter simplicity to elegant truth, they drive him out! Think about it: he moves from isolation to isolation. I suspect that is often a danger of giving yourself to spiritual devotion. It may make you different than the crowd, and they may not accept you back so easily. That is what happened to him. All those years and dreams and prayers were finally answered, and then they drove him out!

But it is there that he meets Jesus, that he sees Jesus for the first time. It is interesting, as this gospel story unfolds, he had met Jesus before but now is the first time that he can see him. The first time they met, he still couldn't see anything. And now, having been healed and empowered and kicked out, they meet in simplicity and—if you will pardon the lowbrow comparison—it almost seems like a scene from Forrest

Gump. It is okay; Truman and Forrest Gump are both alumni of the University of Alabama! You remember how Forest Gump, in his own way, brought such simple and elegant truth to our world.

Jesus and the man born blind sit together. In his own simple yet elegant way, he shares the enlightenment he has found, almost as if they are sitting at a bus stop on a square in Savannah. *Do you believe in the Son of Man? The one you are talking to is he. I believe. I am not a smart man, but I do know what love is. Yes, Lord, I believe.* In a way, the gospel beckons us to appreciate the simplicity and the elegance. And in a way, the gospel demands us to move beyond simple elegance in order to discover true illumination. And it sheds light on us and exposes what we do not always know. *Surely we are not blind, are we?*

I remember about a year ago, I had given an interesting and erudite sermon that explained all the mysteries of life and the existence of God, and people just left the church, not sure if they should shake my hand or keep

walking. And Ella ran up to me. “Guess what we learned in children’s church? God loves us and wants us to love each other. And I saw people smile and nod, relieved at her gospel’s elegant simplicity. *I came into this world so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind. Surely we are not blind, are we?*”

I remember another time years ago. I was helping with Vacation Bible School and we were teaching them the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. A young teenager, Davis, whom I loved, interrupted me. “Father Jay, she said, isn’t your job to teach us to love each other and care for the poor?” *I came into this world so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind. Surely we are not blind, are we?*

On Tuesday this week, a woman called Good Shepherd looking for assistance. Friday, she showed up needing immediate help. I told her that she would need to wait, but that we would help her. She waited three hours. I got back to the church, and she had already scoped out

Waban. So when I asked her to meet me at the Waban Market, she knew where to go. She needed formula for her niece. So we went, and they were nervous because she had been there earlier and had asked someone to buy her a sandwich. And I could tell they were relieved when we left, though I don’t hold that against them. In any case, they don’t have formula at the Waban Market. Ukrainian smoked fish, yes; baby formula, no.

We went to Walgreens to buy formula, after which she said she needed food. I mentioned that we had just been at Waban Market! She said let’s go back, so we did.

And we got back and they looked at us as we came in. And we bought pork chops and we bought juice. And she wanted me to tell you that the prices there are really too high, that we are getting ripped off. And as we left, she thanked me for going there with her. She said she didn’t think the people there liked me very much! She saw the way that they looked at me.

She asked if she could pay us back. I told her it wasn't necessary, but she said it is always necessary and that she would. She gave me a giant bear hug, as people drove by, trying to avoid hitting us in the street.

If there was any credit, it goes to you. It was your money that bought her formula and expensive pork chops. I thought it was funny that we bought her meat on Friday in Lent, though I didn't tell her.

Rejoice o Jerusalem. Rejoice o Waban . Jesus said, *I came into this world so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind. Surely we are not blind, are we?*