

Fourth Sunday in Lent
Wicker Park Lutheran Church
Rev. Jason S. Glombicki
March 26th, 2017

Fire - it's complex, it's mysterious, and it's destructive. In the United States, we've seen an alarming level of wildfires this year. Over 2 million acres have been scorched, which is 10 times higher than average.¹ Some people are not the same after these raging fires. We look with pain at their burnt bodies, and we tremble with fear gazing at their simmering homes. In the Bible, stories of God's fiery wrath are used to motivate or control. Even the inquisition used flames to compel heretics to recant. However, fire is also life-giving. In fact, some species of trees *need* fire for their seeds to be released from the cones.² Fire invites community when we cuddle-up in front of the fireplace or tell stories around a campfire. Fire illuminates. Fire warms. Fire provides life.

Many religions use the ambiguity of fire's destructive and beneficial principles as important symbols of the divine. Christianity's primary liturgical fire is the "new fire." This new fire begins the great Easter Vigil. This custom originates from a pagan tradition of welcoming springtime. St. Patrick, however, broke the law of his time by creating a new fire and dedicating it to the resurrected Christ. The new fire is also called "the light of Christ," and each year its flame is used to light the new paschal candle for the first time.

You see, for us Christians, Christ is our light. Christ illuminates our path. Jesus's life, death, and resurrection enlighten us to see God's activity in the world more fully. Jesus's teachings make visible what we cannot see and stimulate our growth. With this in mind, we recall the burning bush

¹ <http://gizmodo.com/wildfires-have-already-toasted-a-staggering-amount-of-l-1793496136>

² <http://creationrevolution.com/plants-that-need-fire-to-survive/>

where God mysteriously beckoned Moses to save God's people. We also remember the pillar of fire that led the Israelites from slavery into freedom; much like that pillar of fire, the paschal candle's light will guide us from place to place during the Easter Vigil. And, as we heard in the reading from Ephesians, it is this light that inspires our actions, our ministries, and our mission in the church.

If it is Christ's light that inspires, leads, challenges, nurtures, and emboldens our work, then today's gospel reading surely has something to share. In today's reading, we, like the disciples and the Pharisees, can easily get caught in the details. Everyone wanted to find the cause of the blindness – was it the man or the parents? While this might seem like an ancient understanding of difference, this is still a belief today. Those who are differently-abled are sometimes told they did something wrong, or their parents did something wrong, or their families did something wrong. Blame is the name of the game. Yet Jesus reminded us that blame is not the game, for it was not the parents or the man, but rather he was simply born that way.

Verses three and four often trip people so they cannot see the larger picture of this narrative. The way our English-speaking editor translated this from the Greek appears to argue that God made this person blind so that Jesus could heal him. We must be careful with that translation. Remember, the original Greek text does not have punctuation or chapter numbers or verses. These are all added by editors. Furthermore, the crux of this causal assertion is focused on the statement “so that God's works might be revealed in him.” However, the phrase “so that” is not there in Greek. An alternate translation might read “Neither this man nor his parents sinned but he was born blind. (period) But in order that the works of God may be made apparent in him, it is necessary for us to work the works of the one having sent me while it is day. Night comes when

nobody is able to work.”^{3,4} This new translation has a completely different emphasis. The alternative version is focused on God’s works being seen and does not feel the need address the causality. Ok, if you’re not following that’s fine, because, here’s the thing, it doesn’t really matter all that much. In fact, that’s the whole point of this story!

Each character is completely focused on the idea *that* this person is blind and *why* this person is blind that they miss out on *the person* altogether. The focus of this story is not the past. The focus of the story isn’t even the present. The focus of this story is the future. It’s not that this man is born blind, but rather it’s that this man is a person.

And we do this all the time in our culture. We define others by limiting factors or difficult things they’ve experienced. We say he’s divorced or she’s widowed. We define others by their political party. We label someone on their ability – calling them handicap, mentally ill, or physically sick. We label them as old, young, smart, or stupid. We call people black, white, Latino, Muslim, Jewish, illegal, legal, us, them, gay, straight, trans, queer, and the list goes on. I want to be clear, that this is not to say that labels cannot be helpful. However, Jesus reminds us today that when we define people by a simple factor then we often miss the whole person.

In fact, this was emphasized in today’s gospel *after* the man could see when those who knew him well didn’t recognize him. Although they saw this man every day, and while the only thing that changed was that he could see, only one factor, his blindness, is what had come to define him. That one thing became the whole. And with that one factor defining his full self, he lost his life.

Yet, Jesus revealed that it was not the man who was blind, but rather it was those who focused on the blindness who could not truly see. Those who could not see a complex and

³ <http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/>

⁴ https://www.workingpreacher.org/brainwave.aspx?podcast_id=864

beautiful man were in fact blind themselves. We are blind when we do not recognize that as humans we all have goals, wants, and desires. We are truly blind when we fail to recognize the importance of wholeness on an emotional, social, physical, intellectual, and spiritual level. We become blind when we forget the humanity of all people. We all are blind, or as Ephesians puts it, we are darkness. We are not *in* darkness, we *are* darkness. We fail to see and we prevent others from seeing. We do not expose but instead we conceal. We do not illuminate but rather we cast a shadow.

Take a moment to pull out the card in your bulletin. Record words, phrases, sentences, or pictures of the ways *you* fail to see the full humanity of the other. Maybe it's in labels, or your approach, or in your stubborn certainty. Take a moment to jot them down.

Friends in Christ, Ephesians reminds you that you *were* once darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. So, live as children of the light – for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true. Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for everything that becomes visible is light.

Now, I invite you to take your card and pass it to the center aisle. (The cards are collected. Then the bowl in the front of the assembly is lit on fire.) Instead of grasping that card, we spark a new fire today as the light of Christ. We say goodbye to our inability to see the other, and at the same time we work to glimpse God's presence in all people. In baptism, we were claimed as God's beloved and then we were sent to be Christ's light. On the evening of the Easter Vigil we will gather outside and pass the flame of Christ's light much like this. (Small candles are lit from the fire up front.)

Then in this place, among God's people, with the feeling of God's love and grace surrounding us, we remember that we are called to be Christ's light. We recall the stories that invite us to expose injustice. We remember to look towards Christ's peace as a light to our path. You, beloved, are light. Go, and live as a child of light, for Christ is your light. Amen.