

**4 Lent A     March 26, 2017**

**Comfort, Celebration, and Affliction**

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Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century American humorist Finley Peter Dunne is credited with coming up with the phrase: “comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.” In his day, Dunne believed it was newspapers that executed these important tasks, he was even quoted in the 1960 movie *Inherit the Wind* when the character named Hornbeck, a newspaper reporter said, “It is the job of the newspapers to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.” But Dunne’s words were just too good, too easily applicable to other circumstances, to be left alone, and others have coopted this phrase and replaced the word “newspapers” with other things. Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr is one of the people who is said to have adapted Dunne’s words. He used the phrase to describe Jesus mission when he said, “Jesus came to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.”

Even if Niebuhr didn’t come up with the entire quote himself, it certainly looks like that is what Jesus got up to in today’s Gospel reading when he gave sight to a blind man.

It has always troubled me that in this story no one celebrated the miraculous healing the man experienced. It seems to me it is a good thing that a man who was blind, who was a beggar, who the disciples saw not as a person, but as an opportunity to have a theological discussion on sin, who Jesus saw as a human being loved, not despised by God, and gave the man the ability to see. Talk about comforting the afflicted. To me, it seems an obvious occasion to celebrate, to show gratitude, praise and worship. To help a human being who had never seen anything adapt to his new ability to see the whole world. And perhaps to start imaging all the possibilities for this man now that he can see. Perhaps he can enter the workforce, start a family, maybe he could follow Jesus, go into religious studies, the possibilities must have been there. At the very least there should have been cake. (Had it happened here, I know we would have had cake!)

But it seems no one in the man’s community was ready to accept the change and celebrate this man’s sight, instead they seemed unwilling to let go of the man’s blindness. Not even this man’s parents rejoiced when their son could see; as we heard the author of John’s Gospel tell us they were afraid. Likewise, the religious leaders were not astonished or excited or full of wonder at the miracle. Instead they seemed stressed out, and were full of suspicion, judge

mentalism, anger, all of which could stem from fear. Today's Gospel spent more time on all the stress, confusion and fear Jesus' healing caused than it did on the miracle itself. Talk about afflicting the comfortable.

And perhaps that is part of the problem. The part about afflicting the comfortable. One Biblical scholar has observed that the tragedy in this story is that the Pharisees or religious leaders didn't seem to know the man who was healed, even though he had lived and begged in their community. That perhaps the man had been either written off, stereotyped, or categorized in such a way that they didn't have to know him. The man's blindness may have put him in a specific place in the community, whether or not that place was just or right or fair, and everyone, including the religious leaders, the man and his parents, had accepted that place, even justified it, and had grown comfortable with it. When Jesus gave the man the ability to see, he disrupted that accepted comfort zone, and upset the system.

And as several of us learned last Wednesday at the soup and bread dinner and reflection on resiliency, when an individual or group either choose or are forced from their place of comfort, or comfort zone, they can either panic or grow. What we might realize today is that while Jesus did give comfort, especially when he healed people, that healing didn't always bring comfort to everyone, as today's Gospel shows, such acts seem to have caused discomfort. So perhaps theologian Reinhold Niebuhr rightly observed Jesus did afflict the comfortable, and may have and continues to call people out of their comfort zones.

There are many different people to watch in this story and see how they responded to being pushed out of their comfort zones: the religious leaders grew anxious and divided over the miracle: some refused to believe it, others began to wonder who Jesus is. The parents of the man who refused to speak for him out of their own fear of being cast out of their religious community. There is the man himself, who had to testify to his own healing not once but twice, and was ultimately punished for being healed, something he never asked for, by being cast out of his synagogue, possibly being cut off from his family too. And then there is Jesus, who never apologized, who never testified on this man's behalf, who never took the blame for causing such an unholy uprising in the man's community. Instead Jesus only asked the man what he believed and spoke about how this is what the judgment he brings looks like: some see him and believe and follow, and some do not. The judgment isn't punitive as much as it is a choice as to how to respond to Jesus: to react to feeling uncomfortable by trying to discredit him or to

accept him for the discomfort he brings, and to follow Jesus out of those comfort zones that might come at a price of discriminating, stereotyping, or separating those we might not want to acknowledge. And to follow Jesus into the uncomfortable world where not everything is fair, or just; where good people suffer health or financial woes, or are discriminated against because of their age, race, or gender, who lose their jobs because of corporate greed. To follow Jesus and have the courage to see the world in the light he shines, and to live as people of the light even when it doesn't seem to make sense.

I hear a lot of opinions saying the Church is irrelevant, or I, because I am a priest, am irrelevant, because the world has changed, that Christianity and religion in general is declining as modern people now find meaning in other places, places they feel they relate to, where there are more people like them, that are better or more charitably inclined than the institutionalized Church that seems to be more concerned with preserving its old way of life than meeting the needs of modern society. Today's Gospel reminds me and us that religious leaders are not often very good about getting out of their comfort zones and following Jesus. And yet some parishes and some Christians and even some clergy are listening to God's call. Such as how together you and I go out on Ash Wednesday to offer the reminder of God's love to those who walk past our building, when you give a free lunch to whoever is hungry and serve every person with your warm smiles and kind welcomes. You know, most people I see and eat with at Wednesday Lunch tell me the reason they come isn't really for the food, as delicious and comforting as it is; they come because you make them feel welcome, seen, and valued and that helps them see and talk with, listen to, and learn from each other. We answered the call to leave our comfort zone by opening the chapel during the week, offering a place of prayerful rest and in a way is bringing what we have into the busy world at our doors.

Perhaps Jesus isn't calling me or you to leave the church behind when calling us to leave our comfort zones, but to bring the church (and remember a church isn't a building, it is the people, it is you and me and all who have come before us), with all its faults and its good parts too, into the big, wide, busy, messy, sometimes even muddy world. Perhaps Christ is calling us to be something other than relevant, perhaps is calling us to simply share our faith, whether it is the faith of the healed or the faith of those longing to be healed, and let not our light, but the light of Christ shine by asking for forgiveness and to forgive, to be grateful, to listen, to show the joy of hope even in desperate situations.

When we leave our comfort zones with open hearts, something happens, something that happened to the man who saw, who saw not just the world he hadn't been able to, he saw Jesus for who Jesus is, despite being in a suddenly stressful situation. That is the type of spiritual growth that can lead any person, even you and me, closer to Christ, who calls us to follow him and promises to be with us wherever we go, especially when we are in uncomfortable places.