

“We Are Blind and We Need to Be Touched”

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Presbyterian Church in Leonia via Facebook Live

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Lent 4

Psalm 23

John 9:1-41

Our Lenten theme of darkness continues as we journey through this time of pandemic. We are really in the dark with this one. We do not know how long this pandemic will last. We do not know how many people it will harm, or how badly. We do not know the lasting impact to our economy, or our society.

I have always felt it an odd sensation when I enter a movie theater while it is still daylight, and get transported into another time, place, and story by what is shown to me on the screen, and then leave and find that darkness has settled in outside. It always takes me a moment to juggle the false reality of the story I have seen, with the reality of daylight I had left and the reality of dark night that has fallen. I feel like that right now, like I am switching in and out of different realities. I find myself enjoying a moment outside, or immersed in a book or TV show, and then I remember how dark it is and I wonder: were those feelings of enjoyment even real?

The lectionary tells us something today about darkness, for we have a story about a man who was born blind, but through Jesus' touch was made to see again. More specifically, when Jesus spits into the ground, and makes mud with saliva and dirt, and then spreads the mud onto the blind man's face, asking him to wash in the ritual pool, the blind man became able to see. After a week of being told to avoid human contact outside your home, and months of watching COVID-19 snowball into a pandemic, are you with me in feeling that this image is a little bit obscene? Public health officials have drummed into us the importance of keeping safe by having an invisible boundary of at least six feet from other people if you must go out. But *spit and dirt and touch*? Right now, the idea just about makes my skin crawl.

Don't get me wrong-- we have managed to go out. I find that I wake up feeling gloomy as I shake off sleep and remember the reality we are living in. But if I can manage to do something outdoors to be active, I feel so much better. We have been to Overpeck, and yesterday we went hiking at Alpine Park, and each outing we are very vigilant to keep our 6-foot distance from other adventurers. I noticed that my child was panicking each

time she had to pass someone in the park on her bike, until I taught her that she could hold her breath in the moment she was wheeling past them. I am glad for now that she is taking this social distancing rule seriously. But I am wondering if over the long term it will sink into her bones and her brain that she needs to separate people into clean and unclean, safe and unsafe, pure and dirty, healthy and potentially sick. What will happen if she starts to fear human touch? What will happen to all of us if those fears and separations take up permanent residence in our bodies and our minds?

Well, we would not be the first to secure such boundaries. Living in these times of fear gives me a bit more empathy for the rigid purity codes that were given in the Torah. The early laws that governed God's people separated food into what was kosher and what was not kosher. They provided guidance for separating women from the community during their menstrual cycle, and cleansing rituals for them to come back into the community. There were rituals that became windows back into purity if you went out to war, or touched a dead body, or had a wet dream. Anthropologist Mary Douglas wrote an entire book, *Purity and Danger*, on how we associate dirtiness with danger and how we can build entire social and religious systems over classifying and separating what and who are considered dirty, and dangerous with what and who are considered pure and safe. These ideas do not just stop with physical dirt; they extend to entire groups of people.

Blindness was not necessarily associated with impurity in the Torah. After all, one of the patriarchs of the faith, Isaac, had become blind in his old age, which is how his younger son Jacob tricked his older son Esau out of his blessing. Still, enough stigma lingered around blindness that the gathered crowd insisted before Jesus that the man's blindness was either caused by his own sins or those of his parents. They believed he was stained by sin, and therefore unclean, unpure, unholy.

Jesus makes it clear, however, that "Neither this man nor his parents sinned" and in fact God was using his blindness "so that God's works might be revealed in him." I don't read this as God was causing this man's blindness for the sole purpose of showing off God's glory through Jesus. Rather, I read it as God lifting up the blind man as one who could bear witness to what God was doing in the world through Jesus. And the power of what Jesus did went far beyond healing. In a simple touch of spit and dirt, Jesus erased the boundary between blind and sighted; using dirt, he made someone clean.

Now I am not saying we need to go around spitting and touching each other. But I do urge you to not let the boundaries we have temporarily erected to keep ourselves and each other safe to be so fixed in our heads that we get trapped behind them long-term. I

want for you to remember the importance of touching one another, and I want you to keep hoping for a time when you can see and be seen by others. If you are lonely and longing for touch, consider it a good thing, for you have not forgotten what it means to be woven into touching and caring relationships. Let your loneliness be a cry for the incarnational presence and love of God-- which through Jesus has been made available to you when the body is there, *and* when the body is broken.

Deacon Ingrid Brennan said to me in an email that we should be calling our practice these days “physical distancing” rather than “social distancing” “Because today more than ever we need to be more social; just differently.” If we are going to survive this pandemic, we need each other. We cannot do it on our own-- what is the point if we are on our own? And so, I urge you to make it a spiritual practice each day to call someone and spend some time talking about something interesting, sharing your feelings and listening and maybe even laughing. I urge you to keep your distance to stay healthy, but be careful about creating categories in your head. It troubles me that some leaders are calling this pandemic “The China Virus.” It is not fair and is in fact dangerous to place the blame of a virus to which we are all vulnerable onto one group of people. If you look at the conditions of Europe following World War 1, you can see the dangers of placing the sufferings of many onto one group of people through the rise of Naziism.

What we need to do instead of building permanent boundaries in our heads is to remember how badly we need to be touched. When I was walking with my family in Overpeck Park the other day, I saw a couple of stable staff out exercising horses. As I watched the sunlight dance on their hides, I longed to reach through the fence to just touch them. One couple from our church that has taken the shelter in place mandate very seriously, and will be for the long haul, has just adopted a dog who needed a home. This lucky dog will be well-loved, and will give its new family a warm touch in these days of isolation. Even if you do not live with someone else, spend time touching what you can-- a fuzzy sweater you wore the last time you went out with friends, dirt in your garden, bark on a tree, and pray that Jesus work through that sensation to touch you back in an incarnational way and grant you a little healing.

We are blind to what the future of this virus holds for us and for the world. And yet, we trust in a God we call Shepherd. Imagine the gentleness of a shepherd’s hand touching thick, woolen fur. This Shepherd cannot prevent us from going into the valley of the shadow of death. But we need not fear. For the Shepherd stays with us, protecting us with rod and with staff. My hope is that all those who right now we conceive as enemies--- strangers, neighbors, and even family that could all be potential carriers of

this virus-- will one day soon be able to sit together at a table our Shepherd prepares for us and feast. There, with rejoicing, our cups will overflow.