



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea

***The Episcopal Church
in Destin, Florida***

**THE FOURTH
SUNDAY IN LENT**

March 19, 2023

A homily by the Reverend James J. Popham

My ever mildly warped sense of humor – which I try to control when I am wearing my tell-tale collar – would have me offer communion at the rail this morning with the proffer, “Here’s mud in your eye.” Which, of course, draws Biblical support from the reading from the Gospel according to John this morning. In bringing sight to the blind man, Jesus

spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes, saying to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see.

So, “mud in your eye” would make sense wouldn’t it?

The benefits of this sacramental welcoming and embrace of Christ as described in the Catechism are

the forgiveness of our sins, the strengthening of our union with Christ and one another, and the foretaste of the heavenly banquet which is our nourishment in eternal life.

We come to the altar rail in need of healing. And in the words of the prayer after communion at our Wednesday noon healing service, we leave……. “forgiven, healed, renewed.” Dare we say that for most of us that sacramental encounter with Jesus in the Holy Eucharist is no less a miracle than Jesus’ restoration of sight to the blind man.

The bread we take with our hands, the wine we sip with our lips, are, after all, the outward signs that direct us to the inward and spiritual grace of the real presence of Christ within us and among us.

And like the healing of the blind man, is not the grace of the Holy Eucharist really just too good to be true. If we think nothing is happening within us at communion, we might think again. No wonder one theory of the origin of the toast, “here’s mud in your eye,” traces it back to Jesus’ healing of the man blind from birth.

Now let me digress and note another miracle of sorts that is hidden in the story of Jesus and the man blind from birth. And that is the pool of Siloam. After Jo's noting in her sermon last week that Jacob's well was 137 feet deep, you might think we are overly enamored with water. But the depth of the well was pertinent to the story of the woman at the well, and, frankly, more so than the history of the pool at Siloam is to this morning's story. But it is fascinating and somehow instructive as we might muse about what constitutes a miracle.

The pool of Siloam was about 30 feet by 20 feet. Siloam, indeed, means sent, and Jesus did send the blind man there to wash the mud from his eyes. But how the water was sent to the pool of Siloam is one of the great engineering feats of the ancient world.

The source of the water for the pool – and, indeed, for all of Jerusalem –, was the Virgin's Fountain in the Kidron valley. But the fountain was vulnerable to a military siege. If it were captured by an invader, Jerusalem would be imperiled by loss of its water supply.

To preserve Jerusalem's water supply in the event of a siege, King Hezekiah, under threat of invasion by Sennacherib had a conduit cut through solid rock underground from the Virgin's Fountain to the pool at Siloam. It was cut by hand and on a zig-zag course of 583 yards. A plaque found in 1880 recounts the meeting of the stonecutters that had started from each end of the conduit hearing the sound of the picks of the other party when they were three cubits apart, just slightly over four feet. That's pretty nifty underground navigation given the tools at their disposal – or not at their disposal – 2000 years ago.

We sometimes forget that some ancient civilizations were more advanced than we might have thought. And to take this brief digression one more step, we should recall that Jesus did not walk among us at some random moment in history. His time had to be chosen carefully. What would he be considered today? A segment on 60 Minutes? A parody on Saturday Night Live? A fanciful rendition of himself in a Netflix series? A quack? A kook? A madman?

Imagine the sight of Jesus today using spit and dirt to attempt to cure blindness. Most of us would react "ewwwe." But 2000 years ago that made perfect sense. In fact, it was quite common, because the spittle of distinguished persons was thought to have curative qualities. And there was considerable evidence at the time that it did. Pliny, the famous Roman

savant, whose scientific works enjoyed great credibility into the Middle Ages, had a whole chapter on the use of spittle.

And what is the first thing we do when we burn a finger? We'll be liberal with the hand sanitizer before communion this morning. Or maybe we shouldn't.

Jesus knew how to perform a miracle within the framework of the customs of his time. Like any good physician, he gained the blind man's trust by doing what the blind man likely would have expected, using his spittle. And the man blind from birth could see for the first time.

In fact, in Jesus' times, miracles were not considered as something out of synch with natural law, as we tend to see them today. But they still said a lot about the person performing the miracle. And this one – as ordinary as it may have seemed at the time – said a lot about Jesus. It confirmed that, as the blind man told the Pharisees, "If this man were not from God, he could do nothing."

We may not discount the notion of a miracle as something that we cannot explain and typically and rightfully attribute to the power and grace of God. That is largely John's point in including this story in his version of the Gospel. But there is an additional perspective that enjoys emphasis in the miracle stories recounted in the other versions of the Gospel. And that broader perspective might enable us to better answer the question, "How do we perform a miracle?"

Acknowledging that Jesus was, indeed, "from God," even the Son of God, they included miracle stories as a way of revealing God as loving and compassionate, as indeed, Jesus was with the man blind from birth.

Maybe a simple act of kindness, a moment of compassion and love, is no less a miracle that reveals the glory of God. We are after all made in the image of God. So when we are loving and compassionate as Jesus was with the man blind from birth, we reveal God as a loving and compassionate God.

In the motion picture *The Russia House*, Barley Blair, the main character portrayed by Sean Connery, says, "You have to think like a hero merely to behave like a decent human being." That quote always has spoken great truth to me. But I wonder now.

Maybe we need to turn it around. Maybe being a decent human being in itself can be heroic. Maybe simply behaving compassionately makes us

heroes. Maybe behaving compassionately is no less miraculous than what Jesus did for the man born blind.

Maybe we, too, then reveal the glory of God to a world increasingly hungry for some good news and desperately in need of the miracles. And maybe we, too, then in millions of little miracles every day, become agents of that loving and compassionate God, who forgives and heals and restores and renews. After all, what Jesus did was something relatively ordinary in his time. And the ordinary hardly is beyond us.

Please, as tempted as I might be, do not expect me to say, "mud in your eye," at the communion rail. Because the conventional understanding of the term comes from horse racing. If there is mud in your eye, it means that there is a horse in front of you. So it really is a boast or a challenge.

Now we might say that as followers of Christ, that Jesus will always be in front of us, so maybe the analogy holds. But in that sacramental moment when we take the bread and wine of the Eucharist, Jesus is not ahead of us. Jesus is within us.

And, perhaps, that is the miracle that inspires and empowers and enables us to be the miracle workers we are called to be.