

Sunday, March 26<sup>h</sup> 2017  
4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent  
John 9:1-41  
The Rev Fanny Belanger

In 1967, the French thinker Guy Debord wrote a book that made quite an impact when it was released:

*The Society of Spectacle.*

On the cover page,  
you could see people standing next to one another,  
all wearing glasses,  
all looking in the same direction,  
all fascinated by something you could not see from your angle,  
and no one looking at each other, not talking to one another, not doing anything  
for one another.

Fifty years ago,  
Guy Debord was appalled that our society has become a place where  
we are mere spectators.

The world, for most of us, Debord said  
has become a show.

He argues that the history of social life can be understood as *the decline of being into having,  
and having into merely*

*appearing* (or appearing on a screen).

Relations between commodities replace relations  
between people.

*Passive identification versus genuine activity.*

*It is not only that we face a collection of images,*

Debord wrote, *rather it is that relationships between people are mediated by images.*  
1967.

It was only the beginning:

No smart phones, no Netflix, no Facebook, no Amazon, no video games.

I think that if we were suddenly brought back to 1967,

we would feel like the world is a technological wilderness, right?

So where are we today?

Well, we can feel so overwhelmed that a lot of us during Lent give up  
on social medias or try to spend less *screen time*, as we call it.

And we do so in order to do exactly what Debord tells us our society misses so much:

Meaningful and direct human interactions.

No media, no mediation

No screen between us

Engaging, instead of watching

being involved, instead of being connected

being actors, instead of being spectators.

Technology has provided us with the gift of sight  
not only once, but multiple and multiple times.

We live in a world where we can see the infinitely small  
the infinitely large

inside the atom and outside in the galaxy

we can see in real time and on face time our grandson taking his first steps on another continent.

And yet, yet in this world, where like a sort of a strange apocalyptic beast we have all

ten thousands eyes on our back,

the word of God comes to us today to tell us that because we all think we can see,

we may also all have gone blind.

How would you describe what it is to see to a man  
who was born blind?

How would you describe what it is to see to somebody who never got a chance to see what it is  
to see?

I think it must sound completely magic and confusing, and there is no way to represent  
or to communicate what seeing is.

You just see, it comes before any word.

The best explanation I have heard of what it would be to see  
for a man or a woman born blind

is *touching at a distance*

Seeing is like touching at a distance.

Because we know that this is the way blind people watch, right?

They touch.

They touch to get the information we usually get from seeing.

I think that's the best explanation, but still it's so different from seeing with eyes, isn't it?

And what's the difference being touching and seeing?

Well, the more I think about it, the more I believe it is exactly what Debord talked about:

When you see, when you watch, you're a spectator

you sit at a distance

you don't engage, you're not involved

you process with people and things exactly the same way.

But when you touch, you make yourself vulnerable.

You take a risk

the risk of pain, the risk of pleasure

you can't touch people the same way you touch things

and when you touch or taste the world, instead of just looking at it,

you know you're part of it, you're not just in your head

you can't hide within yourself, you have to exist at the tip of your fingers,

at skin deep level.

One of the questions we ask ourselves when reading this Gospel is:

Why is Jesus making mud with dirt and saliva

when he could just say a word, a prayer from the top of his head?

Well, I guess it is really a question sighted people ask.

It took me a while to realize that Jesus just uses the language of the man born blind.

Jesus knows the man cannot see him doing the miracle

so to let him know something is happening

Jesus engages the man in his world of touching tasting

in a world of direct relationships

in a world where you make yourself very small and very vulnerable.

in a world where you let a stranger put dirt and saliva into your eyes.

Yes, but we learn that this is God's world:

Dust and dirt of the flesh and of the road,

bread and wine of weddings and communion,

living water of the Samaritan well and of baptism,

oil and tears of the ointment.

God in John's Gospel is not an abstraction.

God is not an abstraction.

God is not an idea.

God is not even a mere Spirit if by spirit we mean something that's in our head.

Something the Pharisees have a hard time to understand  
and even the disciples

*They are all asking questions*

but none of them is engaging, instead they are all watching  
touching at a distance  
distancing themselves from the event.

I think the way the disciples try to deal with suffering is so characteristic of the way  
we try to deal with it.

We try to understand instead of being involved with it.

We say: Why is there evil in the world? Why are there injustices? How comes God tolerates or allows  
or even orders suffering as a punishment?

Questions to which Jesus responds today

by engaging, instead of speculating.

Jesus walks to the man and heals him

meaning that God does not tolerate suffering, we tolerate it

we allow evil and sin

But God is a working God

even on the Sabbath, our Gospel says, God has no rest, God is working with us and for us.

*Our task is not to understand the world, but to transform it*, a famous philosopher said.

Well, we have to admit

it looks like Jesus is on board with that.

The Pharisees and in some measure the disciples,

*they don't want to get their hands dirty*

they would not touch the mud, and probably not even their own saliva

and certainly not the eyes of a blind man.

And yet, this is what it takes to cure the world, it is to touch its misery, and to be involved in its pain  
and suffering.

Because the blind man confesses Jesus,

it's often easy for Christians to identify with him.

But as I read this story I wonder how often we are like the Pharisees.

How often our religion, our faith, our worship

is a spectacle

something we look at from afar

something we question – which is good -

but sometimes we question not to find an answer but to keep a distance.

Somehow, we make sure we don't believe too much so we will never be disappointed.

Somehow we make sure that not only our faith won't hurt us but

(strangely enough)

we make sure our faith won't spread too much joy.

Even if we are less obsessed with sin than all the people in our story

we hold on low self-esteem, guilt, skepticism.

We may talk to God but we barely listen and we won't let God touch us

or see our souls naked.

We control a well educated faith, we don't surrender to our need of God.

I don't know if you have noticed how deprived this story is of all emotions.  
It reads that it is the greatest miracle of all  
*Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind.*  
And nobody reacts  
Nobody reacts positively.  
We don't know what happens to the disciples, they just disappear from the stage.  
The crowd is skeptic  
The Pharisees are mad  
and even the parents of the man seem embarrassed.  
None of them, except for the blind man, displays any joy.  
*Your own child is cured from a life long disability and you would not be at least a little happy?*  
No, they all just want to make sure God fits  
into their categories.  
Well, a God we can understand is certainly no God at all.

So how do we know God?  
Well, it's like seeing  
You just know, you just see.  
The blind man does not enter into any theological debate, he just tells what happened to him  
He just knows God because God changed his life  
Because he let God touch him.  
I think what we are called to do as Christians is exactly that  
  We can testify by sharing our experience  
  but we first need to experience for ourselves.  
We need to get our eyes and our hands dirty  
we need to stop living into the world (or even attend worship) at a distance  
We need to become real with one another and with God.

One of the things that decided me to start Prison ministry is hearing one of my friends from seminary  
talking about it saying  
*The good news of the Gospel is the only Good news some of these people in jail*  
*will ever hear of.*

She said the first time she went to jail, she met a young woman clinging to her Bible  
like it was a matter of life or death.  
She was so anxious, so longing for a word of comfort and hope.  
And my friend told me, the morning after when she prayed about it,  
it made her cry.  
It made her cry to remember the faith of this woman.  
It made her cry tears of shame, shame that her religion was so often about  
liturgical details, theological points - and not a genuine need for salvation.  
In the next chapter of John, Jesus is going to meet Lazarus at his grave  
where faith really becomes a matter of life and death  
and it reads in the text that *Jesus wept.*  
When I think about that I wonder  
Maybe our eyes are not so meant to see as they are meant for us  
to cry  
to cry tears of despair on the world's darkness,  
to cry tears of joy as the light comes to us to meet us where we are.

May we all welcome the light. Amen.