Lent 4, Year A, March 15 2026 They say they see, and their sin remains

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Shortly after I graduated from college I moved to Rochester, New York, for my first job. And for fun, I joined The Golden Link Folk Singing Society – where we met every week, sat in a circle and sang folk songs. It was fun.

It was also a good way to make friends, and there I met Kathy Leigh Johnson, who was a noted folk musician in the area. She grew up in Kentucky and had this pure, sweet voice. She sang old time gospel songs, and played the guitar. She was older than me and had performed much of her life.

Kathy Leigh was also born blind. Or more accurately she had was blinded shortly after her premature birth, when the high levels of oxygen she was given permanently damaged her eyes. Kathy Leigh's grandmother taught her how to play the guitar, stringing it upside down so that she could more easily form chords by touch.

When I met Kathy Leigh she worked at the same newspaper where I was reporter. She worked in customer relations, using adapted machines with brail screens. I would drive Kathy Leigh and her seeing eye dog, Farah, to folk singing circles and to concerts. She and I became pretty good friends. Good enough that Kathy Leigh was able to help me see some things about myself that I didn't realize were there.

One of those things was insensitivity.

One weekend she asked if I would take her and another blind friend of hers grocery shopping. We walked all over the store, and I think I read every label in the place. Kathy's friend used a cane to get around, while Kathy was guided by her dog. Later, while talking to Kathy Leigh, I made an offhanded comment about how impressed I was with her friend, who seemed to manage the intricacies of the grocery store very well with just a cane.

A few days later Kathy Leigh called me up, and wanted to talk. She was upset. I had really hurt her when I commented on how well her friend used a cane, she told me. She felt that I was putting her down for using a seeing eye dog. She needed me to know that my comments were not ok.

After the first really insensitive thing I'd done in our relationship, I then did the second really insensitive thing: I told her that she was mistaken. I hadn't meant to hurt her feelings at all. I didn't think her friend was better than her for using a cane. That's not what I intended by my comments, I said, with all the patronization I could muster.

Cringe.

I doubt my words made Kathy Leigh feel any better. They did make me feel better, though. Because back then I didn't really know the difference between intent and impact. I thought that if I had good

intentions, then my words couldn't do any damage. And if someone said they had been impacted, well it's just that they misunderstood. Their pain wasn't real, it wasn't valid, and I didn't have to look at it.

Have you ever been in a situation like that? It's one of the key defenses of well-meaning prejudice, your pain isn't real if my intentions were pure.

Of course now I know better. Kathy Leigh's words did their work over time. They made me see.

I say that Kathy Leigh made me see. I do not say that she healed me of blindness. Because I wasn't blind – either physically or emotionally. I could see perfectly well, but failed to notice, failed to recognize something right in front of me, I failed to see Kathy Leigh. Because I was looking elsewhere. I was raised to be a sighted person in a world designed for sighted people, and that world was not built to take into consideration those who could not see. There are lots of reasons for that. There just aren't a lot of excuses.

I bring this up because I want to trouble a little bit the way that our Scriptures, as well as other subtler narratives in our society, equate impairments or disabilities with sin. Now this story starts out pretty well with Jesus rejecting the ancient claim that physical illnesses were God's punishment for sin in the family – a curse on the parents whose child was born blind in this case.

But then the whole story turns on the blindness of the spiritual leaders who failed to recognize Jesus' authority and divinity. That good old Johannian irony needs the blind man to be able to recognize Jesus and the religious authorities to be visually impaired. Before I talk more about what we need to see in this story, I just want us to consider how this treatment of physical impairments in the Scriptures might sound to people who are actually blind, or deaf, or who can't walk or move freely. They are often people who have a great deal of faith, but aren't healed by it. -People who must make their way in a world that doesn't do a very good job of seeing them or adapting to them, and who then are told that no one ever intended to hurt them, or are complimented about how well they get around. Just saying.

We actually talked about this at our healing retreat last weekend. One of the people who attended, who used a wheelchair, pointed out that sometimes people assume that an impairment needs to be healed or removed without checking in with whether the person actually wants their body changed. This is the case among many who are deaf, they pointed out. Another participant mentioned that our bodies are not problems that need to be fixed.

And all that said, the healing of the man born blind is a pretty important story as Jesus' makes his way to Jerusalem, and to the cross. This is not really a story about a faith healing or a physical healing. It's a story about believing what is in plain sight. And it's about what happens to those who should be able to recognize the Son of God by his words and his actions, and who refuse to do so.

Unlike in the version in Mark, in this story, the Man Born Blind is not crying out "Son of David have pity on me." He was a beggar, sitting in plain view. He was being talked about rather than talked to -- until Jesus pushed mud into his eyes and told him to go wash.

I wonder about this man – what he knew, what he recognized, what he heard in that voice. Because he made his way to the pool of Siloam on a word from Jesus, and he washed, and then he was able to see. And the first thing he saw was sin – he saw disbelief and doubt in the people around him. And he heard interrogations and accusations. Jesus was nowhere to be found when the Man Born Blind became the Man Now Sighted, and he had to do all the explaining for his healing. Even his parents wouldn't back him up. He found himself explaining the faith, defending what was true, talking back to the authorities until they ran him out. It wasn't pretty.

Disillusionment never is.

Until finally Jesus sought him out, and asked him if he believed in the Son of Man. What made that Man born blind believe? Because it didn't happen at the moment of his physical healing. It happened gradually in this story, as he navigated the push back and the doubt and denial around him, and he didn't give in to it.

Maybe there was just something in Jesus that was true, in contrast to all the authorities – from the religious leaders to his parents – who denied the healed man's own reality. Jesus at least came back, sought him out, was interested in hearing what he had to say. Maybe he could see Jesus because Jesus saw him. Maybe that was a gift better than 20/20 vision.

But I think that all may be beside the point. Because I don't think this story is about miraculous belief. It's about stubborn disbelief. It should probably be called "the religious leaders born arrogant" or "the people born indifferent." Because these are the folks who truly need to be healed by the Son of God.

Who here has ever found themselves in need of that kind of healing?

What if Jesus never healed the man born blind? What if instead he healed everyone else so that no one born blind would have to beg for their next meal? Or if they were paralyzed wouldn't have to drag themselves to the pool to be healed or be dropped through the roof to get to Jesus?

What if that was the world that Jesus came to bring – not one where the blind and lame are fixed so they can fit into the world of the "able-bodied," but a world where difference or damage or impairment doesn't exclude any one from access to what the dominant group has? What would our streets and sidewalks look like in such a world? Or our grocery store aisles? What would the access to our churches look like or the access to our altars? What would access to health care look like or education or economic opportunities?

Well that would take a miracle, we might say, to change everyone that way. Just look at what many Christians have done and are doing in Jesus' name to those who are different, or have impairments, or find their bodies or their nationalities don't match the norms?

Indeed that is the bigger miracle and the point of the bigger story – the miracle of a changed, a redeemed world. We feel the limits of that miracle in Lent and Holy Week especially, and we insist upon its reality every time we have Eucharist or celebrate Easter. The real question is do *we* want to be healed? The real question is do *we* really want to see Jesus and be redeemed by him?... Amen .