



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE REV. CANON JENNIFER KING DAUGHERTY, CANON FOR ENGAGEMENT & CONNECTION  
THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT, MARCH 19, 2023  
1 SAMUEL 16:1-13; PSALM 23; EPHESIANS 5:8-14; 5:7-9; JOHN 9:1-41

## CASTE BLINDNESS



El Greco, 1570

The gospel story we just heard is commonly called, “Jesus Heals the Man Born Blind.” That makes sense; the healing is the heart of the story. It’s life-changing for the blind

beggar and deeply symbolic for all who witness it. Symbolic because when Jesus makes mud as the means of healing and spreads it on the man’s eyes, he recalls the

story of God’s creation of the first human out of the dust of the earth.

Genesis 2:7 reads: “God fashioned the human, humus from the soil, and blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and the human became a living creature.”<sup>1</sup>

The healing of the blind man IS the heart of today’s gospel, but it only occupies two verses of the forty-one we heard. And Jesus is largely absent except for his encounters with the man at the beginning and the end. The rest of it is a round robin of accusation, interrogation, and debate about who is a sinner, who is a disciple, and who belongs in the community.

I wonder if a better title for this story would be, “The Trouble People Have with the Healing of the Blind Man.” And I wonder if that trouble has to do with *caste* – with social hierarchy and power, what Isabel Wilkerson, the journalist who writes about human nature, explores in her most recent book of the same name.<sup>2</sup>

A caste system divides people into separate groups and ranks them according to worth. The dominant group at the top holds power and wealth, and under them are a series of subordinated groups, with one unequivocally at the bottom. As you move down the hierarchy, there’s increasing dehumanization of each group, with the bottom group regarded as so fundamentally different from the dominating group that they aren’t recognized as kindred in any way.

Caste is created through a common belief system that’s so ingrained, it’s almost invisible. Belief in the natural superiority of the dominating group, their greater intelligence, virtue, and potential. Belief in the importance of purity of that group, resisting close relationships with other groups. And caste is maintained in many ways: the top group’s control and cruelty, the subordinated groups’ affirmation of others’ lower status, and fear instilled in the least powerful.

Wilkerson describes how the social controls and stigma of the caste system lead to an “us vs. them” culture, which convinces people

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 2:7, translated by Robert Alter.

<sup>2</sup> *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* by Isabel Wilkerson, Random House, 2020, 2023.

See also Isabel Wilkerson’s interview by Krista Tippett as part of Seattle Arts and Lectures 2023 program:

<https://onbeing.org/programs/isabel-wilkerson-we-all-know-in-our-bones-that-things-are-harder-than-they-have-to-be/>

they have no stake in the well-being of those beneath them, and in fact, any improvement in others' lives must come at a cost to them. While the means of caste control may shift over time, the underlying hierarchy remains, justifying any oppression that maintains its structure.

Back to the gospel. When we read it through the lens of caste, we clearly see the hierarchy Jesus disrupts when he heals the blind man.

At the top of the heap are the Pharisees, religious authorities whose superiority rests on their strict observance and enforcement of Mosaic law. They judge who is a sinner and who is not, who belongs and who is banished. Beneath them are members of the community who follow their edicts closely and have some power as a result. The ones who bring the man with new sight to the Pharisees for questioning.

Then beneath them are more vulnerable members of the community, like the man's parents, who won't speak of Jesus' role in their son's healing for fear of ejection from the community. And at the bottom are those kicked to the margins by their disabilities or lack of connections, including the blind beggar. This hierarchy is upheld not only through the control of the highest group but

also through the cooperation, silence, and fear of the lower groups.

Jesus sends it all into disarray when he restores the beggar's sight, acknowledging his worthiness and kinship and claiming that God's presence is revealed in him. Now, the Son of God "creates the human, humus from the soil, and the human becomes a living creature."

It is a shocking – and dangerous – act. Because when the one at the bottom of the pile is pulled out and made whole, the whole structure starts to wobble. The round robin of controversy is the attempt of the dominating group to restore order, to get the formerly blind man back underneath them where he belongs. And when he won't go there, calling Jesus a man from God, the Pharisees banish him, making him more vulnerable than ever.

This is where Jesus returns to the story, seeking the man out, affirming his place in God's kingdom, and offering him fullness of life. Jesus can't be more clear that this system of dividing and ranking people, concentrating power and wealth in one group while denying the dignity and worth of others is not of God. It is the opposite of that. It is what Jesus came to turn upside down.

We might believe that caste is a feature of another place and time, but the focus of

Wilkerson's book is this country, today. She looks at the history and structure of inequality in the United States and compares it to the social hierarchy of India and Nazi Germany. She describes the current American caste system, rooted four hundred years ago in the connection of worthiness to race, and expanded over the centuries to include place of origin, immigration status, family lineage, physical ability, and attractiveness.

We see this system at work today in the legacy of redlining in Seattle and the gap in home ownership between white people and people of color. We see it in the disparity of resources and reading skills in elementary schools serving children of wealthy families in Seattle vs. those serving children who are economically vulnerable. We see it here when we pray for the 30+ people who die while unsheltered each month.

The dynamics of this caste system empower some and crush others. Entitle some and penalize others. It stirs anxiety and fear and makes everyone less generous and compassionate. It is not of God. It is the opposite of that.

Exposing and dismantling caste is not primarily a political challenge. It is a spiritual one. It goes straight to the heart of who God creates us to be and how we are meant to live in the world as followers of Christ. Jesus says today, "I am the light of the world. I came so that those who know their blindness will be given sight and those who claim to see and know all will encounter their blindness."

We must encounter and confront our blindness. Learn the history of social hierarchy and power in our country and notice how it manifests today in our own context. Acknowledge where we are positioned in that system, with handicap or privilege, and the beliefs ingrained in us about other groups. Notice and own how we elevate some people and diminish others.

And if we want to follow Jesus, we will use – and share -- whatever power we have to ensure that worth, dignity, and protection are disconnected from hierarchy or domination. There are opportunities for that in the workplace, in social settings, how we parent, how we speak to and influence others.

We can do this. It is how we live in the light and how we walk in love the way Christ loves us. Amen.