Lent 4A March 15, 2026 John 9 Trinity Episcopal Church

Dirt. Spit. Mud.

What is going on here? What is Jesus doing? Spitting into the dirt, making a mud pie, pressing it on the blind man's eyes?

Why do we have this story? Is it about the healing? About seeing? Blindness? Light, dark? Is it about the blind man? Or his parents? Sin? His community? Is it about Jesus? About God?

Well, yes. All of the above. And a whole lot more in these 41 verses. It's a bit of a roller coaster ride through this long story that starts in the first century with that blind man but reaches right out to us in the 21st century. Hang in with me.

To begin, John's version of the Jesus story is so very different from the ones told by Matthew and Mark and Luke. The Fourth Gospel gives us not the pithy parables and memorable sayings of the first three, but long discourses and dense meditations and a whole string of metaphors about Jesus.

You have heard the metaphors: Light of the World, Bread of Life, the Way, the Truth, the Life, the Gate, the Shepherd. John is thick with signs and symbols and metaphors—and he's also keen on contrasts:

Darkness and light, goodness and evil, strangers and friends.

John's community at the end of the first century needed strong metaphors and contrasts to describe the ways of the world and give shape to their place in it. The world they lived in was a scary place. They lived under the boot of Rome, threatened with persecution, removal and extinction. Their Jesus movement was still new, struggling to define itself against the threat of Rome and the older norms of their grandparents' Jewish practice. John's Jewish community was intent on defining their new way. They needed to name who they were, to whom they belonged, who was in and who was out.

And so, John gives them the story of the man born blind. It's a story about boundaries and identity and belonging—*and politics*.

First Jesus sees the man born blind. "Blind?" His disciples ask, "so who sinned? The man or his parents?" According to the codes of their day, illness or infirmity or disability was somebody's fault. Somebody sinned.

Jesus says No to that notion; he breaks with accepted tradition.

And then he breaks another social code—he goes right to the man. He reaches out to touch this one who is unclean, impure, someone who should be avoided. Not only did illness or disability mean *sin*, it meant *unclean*.

But Jesus doesn't hold with those purity laws. He spits in the dirt—yet another violation of the purity code—and mixes his spittle with dirt and rubs the clay on the man's eyes.

And to top it all off, it happens to be the Sabbath, a day on which no work—no healing—is done. Jesus breaks one taboo after another.

Jesus tells the man to bathe in the pool set up for ritual cleansing, to clean the mud from his eyes. And the man can see.

Now the questions start flying. The religious authorities don't like any of this.

Was this man really blind? From birth? Who is this who breaks the Sabbath, who spits in the mud and forms clay just like God in the ancient creation story from Genesis? Who dares to act like God?

We see the parents dodge the questions and back away in fear.

But the man who now can see answers the barrage of questions with the only thing that matters: "I was blind, but now I see."

And so, John tells us, the authorities drive the man out. The man born blind is caste out of the synagogue.

Can't you just see him, shut outside, blinking in the desert sun? He not only can see, but he can see in a whole new way. He not only gets light to end his darkness, he gets enlightened.

He sees that a new way of being is possible, even for him. He gets a new identity. "I was blind, but now I see."

He sees that God is no longer far off, no longer locked up by any holy scripture or temple religion or rules about who is worthy and who is not. God is found out at the edge of things, where taboos are broken and boundaries are crossed. God is found in the mud, in the healing touch of fingers on his once-closed eyes.

"I was blind, but now I see." Amazing grace.

With this story, John shows Jesus introducing a new way to live, a new kind of politics. I'm not talking about electoral politics, partisan politics. I'm talking about politics as the way we order our daily lives, the social values and customs that shape our workplace or our classroom or our committee meetings or our public life. I'm talking about the politics that are central to the life and work of Jesus, the politics we see in all versions of the Jesus story.

This Jesus--

--this One who healed on the Sabbath, who sat down to eat with all the wrong people, who included women as his disciples;

--this One who said that what comes from a person's heart is more important than what goes into their mouth;

--this One who spit in the dirt and made mud;

--this One trades the politics of purity for the politics of compassion.

In this new politics of compassion, the sharp boundaries and hierarchies of the old system are subverted. The new Jesus movement was marked by compassion, by care for those in need, by inclusion of those once pushed to the edge, by acts of generosity and feeding and healing. Those first Christians were known for *tending to their common life for the common good*. As theologian Marcus Borg wrote about the politics of purity and the politics of compassion, "whereas purity divides and excludes, compassion unites and includes." *(Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time, p.58)*

So what does this mean for us? Have we seen the politics of purity in our day? In a church? School? At Thanksgiving dinner? In the practices of public officials? Is anyone today excluded for being "other?"

What do we see when we open our eyes?

I see, in my home state of Minnesota, that 5-year-old boy in the blue bunny hat.

I see, in Buffalo, New York, the blind refugee picked up by Border Patrol, and then dropped off in front of a closed coffee shop. Blind, alone, no English, no money and no way to contact his family; five days later, after his family report him missing, he was found some four miles from the coffee shop, dead in the snow.

I see, here in Santa Barbara, my grandson's Little League coach make sure he keeps his US Passport in his pocket at all times.

I see the politics of purity alive and well across our land.

But I also see the politics of compassion. I am so proud of my friends in my hometown who are out and about everyday providing groceries for people afraid to leave their houses, rides to work and to school for those same families:

I see good neighbors standing guard at school bus stops and workplace entrances.

I see good neighbors with their little plastic whistles at the ready.

I see church ladies on street corners, singing songs of resistance.

I see good neighbors *tending to our common life, for the common good.*

Amazing grace.

I see people across our land, trading –just like Jesus—the politics of purity for the politics of compassion.

Mariann Budde, the brave bishop of Washington DC, calls the politics of compassion the "politics of mercy."

She puts it like this: "The politics of mercy is all about relationships:

relationships with the most vulnerable and those on the receiving end of dehumanizing speech;

relationships with those whose life experiences we do not share;

relationships with those with whom we disagree."

We are called to practice the politics of compassion, in whatever way we can, wherever we can reach. In might be on the streets, it might be within our families, it might be deep in our hearts, where we know whom we call The Other.

We are called to act not only individually but collectively, as we shape our national life.

We are called this Lent—and always—to open our eyes, to see and respond, to bring the light of compassion into the places of darkness. That's where we meet God, that's where we get our identity—where the taboos are broken and the boundaries crossed. Amazing grace.

AMEN