

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

By order of the Second Continental Congress in June of 1776, a committee of five men, made up of Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Roger Sherman, and Robert R. Livingston drafted a document from a composition of Thomas Jefferson that became known as The Declaration of Independence. In it we hear these words:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.¹

Self-evident truths about the equality of each individual...truths, that according to this declaration, do not need to be demonstrated or explained; obvious truths, that are unable to be taken away or given away by the possessor. I suppose this very noble, and a very ambitious aspiration regarding equality can be associated with the inequality that we hear about in our Gospel lessons that are appointed during Lent, as well as the inequality these writers experienced in their day. But the truth about this equality is that it was not equal for all people back then and it remains that way today.

We aspire to live in that equality, just as we aspire to be good and true to our faith, but we end up being the ones who interrogate and distrust when we feel someone is undeserving of grace or even equality. After the start of Lent and the temptation of Christ in the wilderness, we heard during the Second Sunday of Lent that God so loved the world...and we continue to hear in our gospel lessons in this season of Lent, examples of how God loves the world. However, we hear today once again in our Gospel that God's love is restricted by assumed human control, human brokenness, fear, ignorance, and inequality.

For God so loved the world...the cosmos, the Greek word for world...meaning, God so loved the whole universe and all that is in it. It doesn't say that God loved certain people, places, or things, God so loved creation...you and I included in that, and we have NO say about who or what is loved by God. God so loves the world and all that is in it, equally. But even knowing this, we, like the Pharisees in today's Gospel lesson, feel we can parse God's love out to those we feel are deserving...even as we aspire to freely live out our faith in our pursuit of happiness.

The "men" who were thought to be "created equal" in that declaration were those who looked like the ones attempting to implement those wonderful and lofty notions...and not the ones who were working their fields, building their majestic homes, and those men and women of color who were not even considered human...just as God's love was being restricted by the very pious authority known as the Pharisees. They saw to it that God's love was limited by their laws, their authority, and their discernment.

With this in mind, let me set the stage for this blind man who was healed on the Sabbath and then interrogated by the Pharisees, NOT because he was healed, but because the man who did it, was not one of them and that is obvious because he made manifest God's mercy and then to top it off,

¹ The Declaration of Independence Text, IN CONGRESS, July 4, 1776. <https://billofrightsinstitute.org/primary-sources/declaration-of-independence>

he did it on a Sabbath day...and in this merciful act, we see for certain, God's love is self-evident, but the Pharisees don't like that.

So, as our Gospel lesson begins today, we hear that:

¹ As Jesus walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. (John 9:1)

As Jesus walked along...this alone is very vague; there is no concrete time or location...Jesus is just walking along...or so we think. And as he is walking, Jesus is the one who notices the blind man. Every Gospel mentions sight being restored to a blind man. But, if you look at all the other accounts of restoration of sight in the Gospels, you will see that John is different because the blind man does not call out to Jesus, he makes no request of Jesus to be healed, nor does Jesus engage in a conversation with the blind man about being healed...Jesus just notices him as he is walking along. But this is not really just a random act and Jesus is not just walking along.

We hear in chapter 8, just before our appointed Gospel lesson today, that the Pharisees wanted to stone a woman to death for adultery, but Jesus challenges them by saying to them:

“Let any one of you (accusers) who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.”

Of course, no one could throw a stone at the woman. However, the Pharisees and the Jews continue to debate Jesus throughout chapter 8 about being slaves to sin. But according to the Jews, they have never been enslaved to anyone because they are descendants of Abraham. And of course, they are not happy with Jesus and they begin picking up stones to throw at Him. But we hear that Jesus hides himself and exits the temple. With the threat of being pursued by those wanting to harm Jesus we hear at the very start of chapter 9 that Jesus is walking along and sees a blind man so he stops and restored his sight.

At this point of the story, I become very aware of my blindness because if it were me with a bunch of guys wanting to stone me, and not in a good way, I would have seen nothing but a road...with a clean shot to get away from those wanting to do me harm...and high-tailed down that road, stopping at nothing. But Jesus stops, and heals a blind soul by the side of the road. This not only gets Jesus in trouble, it seems to get the blind man in trouble as well, because we see that he and his parents are interrogated by the Pharisees with the threat of being cast out of the temple which meant an abrupt expulsion from God's presence due to irreverence, corruption, or impurity. They are threatened to be cast out because a man's sight is restored...how irreverent...how corrupt...how impure...how unequal.

For God so loved the world...nonetheless, the Pharisees believed they could cast out an individual who had been healed...an individual who had been born blind and has his sight restored on the Sabbath...they felt they could remove this person and his parents from God's presence, from God's love...because *they* felt he was unequal. For God so loved the world and that love is seen in the mercy Jesus pours out upon this blind man who in the eyes of that culture was seen as a sinner because he was born blind. I guess this blind man was not “created” equal, or that his parents sinned causing him to be born blind and not equal. If there is any equality at all in this story, it is that we are all equally blind when we hypocritically judge others or step on other's faults and shortcomings to falsely elevate ourselves with the assumption that we will be seen as sinless...or that “my sins” will not be seen as bad as their sins.

We like the Pharisees sit blindly in our piety and judge or we remain silent in the face of inequality and hold fast to our pious understanding of our faith so that it is not tarnished by the world. We are no longer equal, because we blindly see ourselves as better. Nonetheless, the Pharisees interrogate this blind man and his parents by holding up their authority and their knowledge and expect the blind man and his parents to blindly accept their position...but he now sees and sees clearly. But each time this interrogation happens, the man counters with his own knowledge and experience of Jesus, because before this healing, his knowledge was blind, but now he sees. He takes over the role as teacher in front of the Pharisees. The man who was once blind turns out to have a sharper spiritual vision than the Pharisees who blindly view themselves as authoritative and better and have never been blind. But sadly, as we see, the Pharisees are the ones who are blind and can only resort to saying:

"You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" And they drove him out. (John 9:34b)

They thought they could drive him away from God's presence when it is the very presence of God that enables him to see. But just as it has been since the beginning, as this man is driven out, Jesus seeks him out and finds him just as he finds us all who have by our very sin fallen from the presence of God. It is God who so loved the world and it is God who makes us all equal in Jesus Christ. It is the very human element of Jesus that makes God's love for us known and that human revelation, Jesus Christ, reminds us that GOD created us equal and makes us equal in that love that is Jesus Christ. This human element of God Himself in Jesus Christ never changes nor is it a metaphor...it's real...and, as real and as human as Jesus is, it makes our relationship with God just as real as each one of us listening to this message today...and it is that message of God's love for the world that makes us all equal. Jesus is God's self-evident love that creates equality among each and every one of us. And in that love, we are forgiven sinners who live under the promise of salvation made know on the cross.

As Jesus walked along, he sees a blind man by the side of the road and opens his eyes. Likewise today, Jesus sees us here in this gathering and opens our eyes, not with mud and spit, but with love and the Holy Spirit and his very human nature, his flesh and blood...this Holy Meal of bread and wine. By His very human flesh and blood of our Holy Eucharist we are equal in that we are freed from sin and death.

Today, the very presence of Jesus is with us, He is the light of the world that shines on us all, equally, and is with us in the proclamation of this Gospel that is God's self-evident and unalienable love that cannot be taken away or given away. May this Holy Word Jesus Christ be the light that guides us all through the dark valleys and along right pathways. May the light of Jesus Christ be the light that leads us all to green pastures and still waters. This is the goodness that is with us in these difficult and confusing times. May this light bless us all and keep us in the days ahead.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.