



The Rev. Jennifer King Daugherty  
Fourth Sunday in Lent – March 15, 2026

## Caste Blindness

*1 Samuel 16:1-13; Psalm 23; Ephesians 5:8-14; John 9:1-41*



*Christ Healing the Blind, El Greco*

[John 9:1-41] *As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes, saying to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, “Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?” Some were saying, “It is he.” Others were saying, “No, but it is someone like him.” He kept saying, “I am he.” But they kept asking him, “Then how were your eyes opened?” He answered, “The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, ‘Go to Siloam and wash.’ Then I went and washed and received my sight.” They said to him, “Where is he?” He said, “I do not know.” They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was a Sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, “He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see.” Some of the Pharisees said, “This man is not from God, for he does not observe the Sabbath.” Others said, “How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?” And they were divided. So they said again to the blind man, “What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.”*

*He said, "He is a prophet." The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" His parents answered, "We know that this is our son and that he was born blind, but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself." His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him." So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, "Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner." He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" He answered them, "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?" Then they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from." The man answered, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" And they drove him out. Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" He answered, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him." Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." He said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped him. Jesus said, "I came into this world for judgment, so that those who do not see may see and those who do see may become blind." Some of the Pharisees who were with him heard this and said to him, "Surely we are not blind, are we?" Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains.*

The gospel story we just heard is usually called, "Jesus Heals the Man Born Blind." That makes sense; the healing completely changes the man's life and carries deep symbolism for those who witness it. Because when Jesus makes mud and spreads it on the man's eyes, he echoes the story of creation itself, when God forms 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 long gospel, but it only occupies two

verses of the forty-one we heard. And Jesus is largely absent from this story 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 Man Born Blind." And I wonder if that trouble has to do with social hierarchy, power, and the ways we justify injustice – in short, with *caste*. Because what happens in this story is not just a miracle of new sight. It is the catalyst for Jesus' complete disruption of social hierarchy.

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

The journalist Isabel Wilkerson published a book during the pandemic called Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents, in which she compares the U.S. system of racial hierarchy with that of Nazi Germany and the traditional caste system in India.<sup>2</sup>

A caste system divides society into ranked groups based on presumed worth. The dominant group at the top holds power and wealth, while subordinated groups occupy lower levels, with one firmly placed at the bottom. As status declines, dehumanization increases until those at the lowest level are treated as though they are fundamentally different creatures from those at the top. And certainly not kin.

These systems are sustained by beliefs so deeply embedded they are almost invisible: that the dominant group is naturally superior and that its purity must be protected from close association with those who are different. Caste is enforced through power from above, the internalization of hierarchy among subordinated groups, and fear directed at those with the least power.

Wilkerson argues that this structure creates an “us versus them” culture in which people feel no stake in the well-being of those beneath them. Even as the methods of control evolve, the hierarchy itself endures.

When we return to the gospel story and read it through this lens, the hierarchy becomes clear. 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 enforce their judgements – the neighbors who bring the healed man to be questioned.

Beneath them are more vulnerable people, like the man’s parents, who refuse to speak about Jesus because they fear being expelled 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 worth, restoring his kinship with the community and revealing God’s presence through 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

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

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, bringing sight to the blind and blindness to the sighted, dignity to the humiliated and humility to the arrogant.

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 linking of worth to race, and expanded over time to include place of origin, immigration status, family lineage, physical ability, and even attractiveness.

We see this system at work today in Seattle's history of redlining and the continuing gap in home ownership between white families and families 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.

The dynamics of this caste system empower some and crush others, stirring anxiety and fear and making 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. Because it goes straight to the heart of who God creates us to be and how we are meant to live 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 and notice how we elevate some people and diminish others.

If we want to follow Jesus, we will use – and share -- whatever power we have so that dignity and protection are not tied to hierarchy. We can do this in the workplace, in our families, in social settings, and how we speak about others.

The gospel ends with the man cast out of the community. But Jesus goes looking for him. That may be the most important line in the whole passage: *Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and he found him.*

Again and again in the gospels, that is what Jesus does. He seeks out the ones pushed to the margins and restores them to the human family.

If we want to walk in his light, we must see as he does— recognizing the dignity of those the world ranks lower and refusing the blindness that divides us from one another.

Because in God's kingdom there is no caste.

Only kin. Amen.