

# On Our Collective Blindness

March 22, 2020

Many of you know that I spent the first ten years of my professional ministry in the Roman Catholic tradition. In that capacity, I facilitated their elaborate year-long adult Baptism and Confirmation programs. The way it worked was that throughout a school year, all of the adults who wanted to become Catholic would gather twice a week for Bible study, theology classes, worship, and the highlight was Easter, when we would Baptize those who hadn't been already, and Confirm them all.

In that elaborate process of adult formation which immersed new people into the faith, both literally and figuratively, the third, fourth, and fifth Sundays of Lent were called "The Scrutinies."

I kid you not.

They were trying to bring people into the church, trying to help people deepen their relationship with Jesus, and just before the big celebration, those people who had been preparing and studying and praying were asked to stand before the church for what were officially called "The Scrutinies"?

Let me tell you, it was a hard sell.

You can imagine there were any number of things in that tradition that I thought could use a good marketing overhaul. While this wasn't at the very top of the list, it was probably in the top 10...or 20...Yet, while the name "The Scrutinies" was a tough sell in 21st century United States, the intention behind the ritual has always struck me as rich beyond measure. For the month leading up to an adult's Baptism or Confirmation, they are encouraged to really look at their lives, to scrutinize them, and the church community holds them in prayer as they are doing so. Today's Gospel is one of the texts they were encouraged to ponder and pray about.

Our Gospel today is familiar to many – the man born blind. In it, Jesus' disciples ask whose fault it is that this man was born blind. Jesus says neither the man nor his parents' sin was to blame. Jesus proceeds to cure the man's blindness, the religious authorities get upset by this and engage in an elaborate blame game, and the passage ends with Jesus talking about coming in order that the blind may see and those who see may become blind.

As we engage this passage in March of 2020, amidst quarantine and social distancing, we can't help but contemplate the spiritual and social blindness that has brought human civilization to this brink. While the term "scrutiny" may have been bad marketing on behalf of my former church, our world and our hearts could really use some scrutinizing right about now. Beyond the fear of being infected and our anxiety around social distancing, today's Gospel calls us to scrutinize how it is that we got to this point. How it is that it has taken government orders to make us pull back from our breakneck, self-

absorbed way of being in which we spent so much of our time on doing and producing and so found so much of our value in work, rather than relationship.

This is what UCC scripture scholar Walter Bruggemann calls “Pharaoh’s production-consumption society.” That is, we have centered ourselves on production and consumption and the habits around that, which are the ways of Pharaoh, rather than on the ways of relationship and community, which are the ways of God.

The ways we’ve done this are both glaring and subtle. So many have questioned how it is that in this great nation of ours one of the first fears when we contemplated closing schools was how the millions of children who rely on school breakfast, lunch, and sometimes dinner would eat. Another area of massive social blindness has been around the extraordinary numbers of low wage workers who we depend on day to day who are working paycheck to paycheck. Even those of us who have seen how precarious low wage workers’ existence is have done very little to change the system.

But our complicity in Pharaoh’s production-consumption society is much more subtle, too. A while back, a stranger dropped in at the church office. They had been cleaning out their parents’ home after they died, and found a Union Church Sunday School Perfect Attendance Ribbon. Given the look of the ribbon and the deceased’s age, it was probably from the late 1940s or maybe the ’50s. It was very sweet, and we added it to the box of items that we periodically ship off to Union’s archives at UW-Green Bay.

On the flip side, I vividly recall training a new Sunday School teacher at another church about 10 years ago, and having her break down in tears. She had been flipping through the binder I gave teachers which included tips on classroom management and best practices, and had been moved to tears by my reminder not to emphasize perfect attendance because it is rarely the child’s choice as to whether or not their family comes to church week by week. She told me that perfect attendance had been a big deal at her last church, and that her kids had felt somehow “less than and ostracized” because her ex wouldn’t take them to church the weekends they were with them.

Perfect attendance is just one of those small, insidious ways we have allowed Pharaoh’s ways to become our ways, producing good little producers and consumers rather than emphasizing relationship with God or care of neighbor. We’ve become blind to how our society rewards behaviors that perpetuate models born of productivity, which is less about God than about the economy.

There are any number of jokes out there right now about how we’re coping with social distancing. Already last week a friend promised to throw the biggest party ever once this is all over. She said this partly because she’s going to want to see all of her friends, and partly because she wants to show off how beautifully organized every closet and drawer is in her house.

Others have joked that without all of the commitments they usually had, they're going to spend hours a day in their home gym and emerge from this time of social distancing looking like an Adonis, albeit an Adonis in need of a haircut.

But rather than writing the great American novel, or becoming the next Marie Kondo, what if, instead, we would use this time as rest, as Sabbath?

What if we allowed this time to expose our blindnesses to how our ways of being up until ten days ago were unsustainable?

Spiritual writer Emma Zeck encourages us to allow our ways of being to be transformed, instead of translating our old way of being into a new context:

*What you can do instead is observe this pause as an opportunity.*

*The same systems we see crumbling in society are being called to crumble in each of us individually.*

*The systems that taught us we are machines that live to produce and we are disposable if we are not doing so.*

*The systems that taught us that monetary gains take priority over humanity*

*The systems that create our insecurities then capitalize off of them*

*What if we became curious with this free time, and had no agenda other than to experience being?*

*What if you created art for the sake of creating?*

*What if you allowed yourself to rest and cry and laugh and play and get curious about whatever arises in you?*

*What if our true purpose is in this space, as if Mother Earth is saying: We can no longer carry on this way, the time is now - I am reminding you who you are.*

*Will you remember?*

Friends, our Lenten theme this year is Beauty Beyond Brokenness. Today as we contemplate our personal and societal brokenness, our personal and societal blindnesses, amidst this unprecedented experience of global pandemic, my prayer for us all is that we will come out of this experience transformed. Not necessarily with tighter abs or cleaner homes, but with a more Godly mindset.

You are not a cog in a wheel.

You are more than what you produce,

You have value beyond what you can purchase.

You are God's work of art.

You are Jesus' beloved.  
You are the Spirit's joy.

Allow this exile to heal you of the habits and patterns and commitments you absorbed in slavery. And be at peace. In doing so, much like in the man born blind, God's works will be revealed in you.

May it be so. Amen.

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**John 9:1-24; 27, 34-40**  
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