

Sunday, March 26^h 2017
4th Sunday in Lent
John 9:1-41
The Rev Fanny Belanger

In 1967, the French thinker Guy Debord wrote a book that made quite an impact when it was released:

The Society of Spectacle.

On the cover page,
you could see people standing next to one another,
all wearing glasses,
all looking in the same direction,
all fascinated by something you could not see from your angle,
and no one looking at each other, not talking to one another, not doing anything
for one another.

Fifty years ago,
Guy Debord was appalled that our society has become a place where
we are mere spectators.

The world, for most of us, Debord said
has become a show.

He argues that the history of social life can be understood as *the decline of being into having,
and having into merely*

appearing (or appearing on a screen).

Relations between commodities replace relations
between people.

Passive identification versus genuine activity.

It is not only that we face a collection of images,

Debord wrote, *rather it is that relationships between people are mediated by images.*
1967.

It was only the beginning:

No smart phones, no Netflix, no Facebook, no Amazon, no video games.

I think that if we were suddenly brought back to 1967,

we would feel like the world is a technological wilderness, right?

So where are we today?

Well, we can feel so overwhelmed that a lot of us during Lent give up
on social medias or try to spend less *screen time*, as we call it.

And we do so in order to do exactly what Debord tells us our society misses so much:

Meaningful and direct human interactions.

No media, no mediation

No screen between us

Engaging, instead of watching

being involved, instead of being connected

being actors, instead of being spectators.

Technology has provided us with the gift of sight
not only once, but multiple and multiple times.

We live in a world where we can see the infinitely small
the infinitely large

inside the atom and outside in the galaxy

we can see in real time and on face time our grandson taking his first steps on another continent.

And yet, yet in this world, where like a sort of a strange apocalyptic beast we have all

ten thousands eyes on our back,

the word of God comes to us today to tell us that because we all think we can see,

we may also all have gone blind.

How would you describe what it is to see to a man
who was born blind?

How would you describe what it is to see to somebody who never got a chance to see what it is
to see?

I think it must sound completely magic and confusing, and there is no way to represent
or to communicate what seeing is.

You just see, it comes before any word.

The best explanation I have heard of what it would be to see
for a man or a woman born blind

is *touching at a distance*

Seeing is like touching at a distance.

Because we know that this is the way blind people watch, right?

They touch.

They touch to get the information we usually get from seeing.

I think that's the best explanation, but still it's so different from seeing with eyes, isn't it?

And what's the difference being touching and seeing?

Well, the more I think about it, the more I believe it is exactly what Debord talked about:

When you see, when you watch, you're a spectator

you sit at a distance

you don't engage, you're not involved

you process with people and things exactly the same way.

But when you touch, you make yourself vulnerable.

You take a risk

the risk of pain, the risk of pleasure

you can't touch people the same way you touch things

and when you touch or taste the world, instead of just looking at it,

you know you're part of it, you're not just in your head

you can't hide within yourself, you have to exist at the tip of your fingers,

at skin deep level.

One of the questions we ask ourselves when reading this Gospel is:

Why is Jesus making mud with dirt and saliva

when he could just say a word, a prayer from the top of his head?

Well, I guess it is really a question sighted people ask.

It took me a while to realize that Jesus just uses the language of the man born blind.

Jesus knows the man cannot see him doing the miracle

so to let him know something is happening

Jesus engages the man in his world of touching tasting

in a world of direct relationships

in a world where you make yourself very small and very vulnerable.

in a world where you let a stranger put dirt and saliva into your eyes.

Yes, but we learn that this is God's world:

Dust and dirt of the flesh and of the road,

bread and wine of weddings and communion,

living water of the Samaritan well and of baptism,

oil and tears of the ointment.

God in John's Gospel is not an abstraction.

God is not an abstraction.

God is not an idea.

God is not even a mere Spirit if by spirit we mean something that's in our head.

Something the Pharisees have a hard time to understand
and even the disciples

They are all asking questions

but none of them is engaging, instead they are all watching
touching at a distance
distancing themselves from the event.

I think the way the disciples try to deal with suffering is so characteristic of the way
we try to deal with it.

We try to understand instead of being involved with it.

We say: Why is there evil in the world? Why are there injustices? How comes God tolerates or allows
or even orders suffering as a punishment?

Questions to which Jesus responds today

by engaging, instead of speculating.

Jesus walks to the man and heals him

meaning that God does not tolerate suffering, we tolerate it
we allow evil and sin

But God is a working God

even on the Sabbath, our Gospel says, God has no rest, God is working with us and for us.

Our task is not to understand the world, but to transform it, a famous philosopher said.

Well, we have to admit

it looks like Jesus is on board with that.

The Pharisees and in some measure the disciples,

they don't want to get their hands dirty

they would not touch the mud, and probably not even their own saliva
and certainly not the eyes of a blind man.

And yet, this is what it takes to cure the world, it is to touch its misery, and to be involved in its pain
and suffering.

Because the blind man confesses Jesus,

it's often easy for Christians to identify with him.

But as I read this story I wonder how often we are like the Pharisees.

How often our religion, our faith, our worship

is a spectacle

something we look at from afar

something we question – which is good -

but sometimes we question not to find an answer but to keep a distance.

Somehow, we make sure we don't believe too much so we will never be disappointed.

Somehow we make sure that not only our faith won't hurt us but

(strangely enough)

we make sure our faith won't spread too much joy.

Even if we are less obsessed with sin than all the people in our story

we hold on low self-esteem, guilt, skepticism.

We may talk to God but we barely listen and we won't let God touch us

or see our souls naked.

We control a well educated faith, we don't surrender to our need of God.

