

Narrator: Our gospel reading for today comes from the first half of John which is often called The Book of Signs. We use that term because this particular portion of John's gospel contains several stories which are miracles in and of themselves, but which also serves as signs pointing beyond themselves to a larger truth. That's one of the functions of a sign after all. Consider the significance of a hand shake, a kiss, a flag, a cross. Each is laden with meaning greater than the gesture or object itself. Our gospel story serves a similar function by weaving together a series of dramatic events. Even though Jesus isn't present for most of these events, the story is in every way about Jesus and his true identity. We encounter him and his disciples in Jerusalem where he has just made a quick exit from the temple after a heated debate there with the religious authorities. They had declared themselves the winner of that debate by picking up stones which they would just have soon have thrown at Jesus as not. Listen carefully now as I read this gospel story. Listen to the major players because there are several of them, and think about where you might have come down in the debate. As Jesus 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 Jesus 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 pull 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 the man!" But they kept asking him, "Then how are 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. But others said how can a man who is a sinner perform such signs. And they were divided. So they 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 listened. 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?" And 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 who opened the eyes of a person could be made well after being blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing. They answered him, "You were born entirely in sin. "And you are 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 near 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." This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. As we hear the drama of this wonderful story unfold, our hearts go out to the man born blind. First of all because of the trials he must have endured as a handicapped person destined to sit by the road and beg, and then because of the indignities he had to suffer just because Jesus healed him without his even asking for it. With no forewarning, Jesus forms a cake of mud from dirt and his own spittle, and spreads it on the man's eyes. Go and wash in the pool of Siloam, Jesus tells him, which he does. And when he comes back, he can see. It only takes two verses in this long chapter to perform such a miracle as this. While it takes 39 verses to unpack the controversy surrounding it. As one member of my bible study said after reading this lesson on Friday, "Jesus sure liked to stir things up, didn't he?" Whether or not he liked doing it, it often seemed to work out that way. No sooner has Jesus left the scene of the miracle that the man's neighborhood is buzzing. After squabbling over whether this really was the man they were used to seeing begging on the corner, they decided to grill him on the details. How did it happen? Where is the man who did it now? About all the healed man can say is that the man called Jesus did spread mud on his eyes and told him to wash. Beyond that, he is clueless. At least for the moment. Notice the glaring absence of any sense of celebration among his acquaintances. No thanks giving that for the first time in his life he could actually see. No jubilation that he could find another livelihood now besides begging. Instead these neighbors, whom I would not go as far as calling friends, were consumed by the question, "Who is this man called Jesus?" And so aware that laws had been broken, the miracle was performed on the Sabbath after all, these same neighbors take the man to the Pharisees where they too could begin their investigation. After the man explains all that he knows, some of the Pharisees are indignant. This man speaking of Jesus is not from God. He doesn't even observe the Sabbath. But others see it a little differently and they raise the issue how can a man who is a sinner perform a miracle like this. The Pharisees are divided so they turn again to the man who has been healed. Becoming a little bolder now, he dares to call Jesus a prophet. Still unconvinced that the man had ever been blind, the Pharisees next interrogate the poor parents. They are reluctant to acknowledge anything more than the fact that he was indeed their son who had been born blind. They were afraid, afraid, because the authorities had already announced that anyone confessing Jesus to be the Christ would be cast out of the synagogue. Their response may seem hard hearted to us when they answer, "He is of age, ask him." But doesn't fear often cause us to say things we later wonder why we said it? And so in the next scene, we're back to the healed man and the religious authorities as the

pressure builds and the tempers flare. We know anyone who breaks the Sabbath must be a sinner is the Pharisees clear position, which after all was based on centuries of teaching. In contrast, the man offers his testimony, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. "One thing I do know that though I was blind, now I see." You can understand how the authorities are in a real bind. Either they must accept that the man was healed and that the healer is God's agent, or they must hold the line and reject both the healer and the one who was healed. The formerly blind man challenges the Pharisees by insisting that if Jesus were not from God, he could have never performed such a miracle, period. But the Pharisees lash out at him in response, "You were born entirely in sin "and are trying to teach us?" Referring to the assumption in those days that anyone suffering from a physical affliction was a sinner whereas anyone who obeyed the law was not. Finally the Pharisees are pushed beyond their limits and they drive the man out of the synagogue. In the final scene, Jesus hears of the man's plight and seeks him out in order to fully reveal himself to him as Jesus likes to do. Do you believe in the son of man? I can imagine this man turning to Jesus with tears pouring down from his freshly healed eyes, now able to see the world with all its beauty and its turmoil, cut off from Torah, his own family, his own community. He finally affirms, "Lord, I believe." Though his eyes were healed instantaneously, the light of Christ has only gradually dawned upon him. Throughout the course of his harsh interrogations, the man grows more and more courageous in naming Christ, even in front of his opponents. First, as the man called Jesus, then a prophet, then a man of God, and finally Lord whom he falls down and worships. His healing is not an end in itself. Just like a conversion is not an end in itself, but only the beginning of a journey. Before the man can say Lord I believe, he experiences hardship and loss, opposition from people in power, and times of not having all the answers. He struggles but he never denies the reality, the one thing he knows for sure, that Jesus has healed him. And that one thing is enough to introduce him to a whole new world of faith. Now for those of us who are so sure we know what a person has to say and do and look like in order to be saved, this story lends an important perspective. As Jesus said, "I came into the world for judgment "so that those who do not see may see, "and those who do see may become blind." in other words, Jesus has a preference for those who are blind and know it. Even when they are theologically unsophisticated, socially unacceptable, or disrespectful of authority, like the man in the story. His preference is for those over those who are so sure their sight is 20-20 vision that they miss their chance to be healed. In Barbara King Sauver's most recent novel named *The Poisonwood Bible*, we meet a baptist missionary from Georgia named Nathan Price. Reverend Price has been called with his wife and four daughters to live and preach in the Belgian Congo in 1959. The story is a spell-binding depiction of life in central Africa 40 years ago, with all its beauty, its suffering, and its political turmoil. Reverend Price proves to be the most despicable character in the whole story, I'm sorry to have to say. He's an absolute tyrant toward the villagers of his mission and his family. From the moment he touches ground and is invited to a welcoming meal by the people whom he will be ministering to, he launches into an assault on his host. Starting with a fanatical sermon on nakedness, a fact of reality in that part of the world, he preaches sermon after sermon about the necessity of baptizing all the children in the Congo River, even though in a recent tragedy, a child from the village had been eaten by a crocodile in that same river. They were so terrified of his intentions that people stopped coming to his services and so he resorts to railing of the villagers publicly whenever he gets the chance. And finally performs mass baptisms unannounced on the children of the village in the midst of a long-awaited rainstorm. Reverend Price was convinced that God had called him to save the natives on his own terms, no matter what it took. But by the end, rather than saving anyone, he has destroyed the mission, his family, and himself. Using the bible as his chief weapon. You can imagine where

the book gets its title. In the Johannine community for which John's gospel was written, their main source of tension was between Jews who called themselves disciples of Jesus and other Jews who remained disciples of Moses. Professor Richard Litscher of our Divinity School and other scholars say this lesson may reflect the historic parting of the ways between those who remained faithful to the synagogue and those who were cast out for following Jesus. As we apply this lesson to our own context today however, I don't think of Jews disagreeing so much about Jesus as Christians disagreeing about Jesus. We hear almost on a daily basis of grievous differences among Christians that in the worst cases cause violence to erupt among us, and at the very least, threaten the unity of the whole church. With those on each side usually being certain they hold the key to the truth. While King Sauger's Reverend Price may seem to us like something of a caricature, his attitude of we'll do it no way but mine, is more prevalent within the church than we like to think. We all have our biases, our own spiritual blindnesses. And in many cases, we like it that way. Thank you very much. When I first began to talk about going to seminary back in the mid '70s, one of the least enthusiastic people about that decision was my mother. At the time I thought she was being unsupportive, but her position really was that she had lived a lot longer than I had and she knew people were slow to change. She had lived in the rural south during the days of Jim Crow. She had seen how violently people had opposed integration. And she believed women in the pulpit just might face some similar resistance to change. And that wasn't something she wanted her daughter to go out looking for. As it turned out, her instincts were right, but not her conclusions. As an example of change in the Protestant church, the incorporation of women into the ordained ministry will stand as one of the landmarks of the 20th century. Yes, there have been proponents and opponents. There have been harsh words and stubborn attitudes along the way. But as a parishioner at my first church said, "Clergy women are going to show the church that we can change." And with Jesus' help, he was right. As these women walked into situations where at first there were strong objections and then it eventually became strong support, it became clear that the love of Christ when given a chance, can overcome the staunchest opponents. The practice of clergywomen now has become so commonplace that many of you probably don't think twice about it. But it was a different story 20 years ago when women first began streaming out of seminaries, degrees in hand with no place to go. And it was a remarkably different story 40 years ago when several of the main line protestant churches first allowed women to seek ordination. I wonder what people will be saying 40 years from now about the church's ability to maneuver our way through other mine fields such as doctrinal disagreements, race relations, homosexuality, abortion, the growing disparity between the haves and the have nots, or any other issue that threatens to divide us right down the middle. Will they look back and say Jesus performed a miracle? Those Christians received a vision. They learned to bear witness with one another rather than against each other. To the life giving character of God's in breaking rein for all the world to see. Or will they shake their heads and say what a waste. Those Christians were too blinded by their own righteousness to do what was right and the world simply passed them by? At the time of baptism, the officiant often places a lighted candle in the hand of the one being baptized or of a parent in the case of infant baptism, and says these words, "Let your light so shine "for all the world to see that you may give glory to God." In our baptism we are initiated into a community that shares in the light of Christ, or as we read in a letter to the Ephesians, "We are light." Even as we confess to our blindness, we receive a new vision and a new life. And together we seek to live as children of light. Knowing that even death on a cross could not extinguish the light of Christ, we have hope that his light shining through all of us will also endure eternally that our lives may be signs of his rein on Earth and that of the Judgment Day, we will have no need to say, "Surely we are not blind, are

we?" Open your eyes, cherish your God-given sight, and tell the world the Good News of Jesus Christ, the one who heals us and sets us free. Amen.