

**Fourth Sunday of Lent A
March 14, 1999**

By Father Charles Bowes

**Samuel 16:1, 6-7, 10-13
Ephesians 5:8-14
John 9: 1-41**

The Lord sets us free to see.

Sin is a lot easier to handle when we can count it...as in this conversation I had with a prisoner in maximum security some years ago: “What are you in for?”

“Murder.”

“How many did you kill?”

“Eight men in one day.”

“Why eight?”

“They were all in the room at the same time and I didn’t want to leave witnesses.”

See, “...eight...count ’em...” and so we know where we stand with God, when we can count our sins.

But John’s gospel throws a monkey wrench into this moral calculation. According to St. John in this chapter 9, sin is not about what we do, but about how we relate to God. For the religious leaders portrayed, Jesus sinned not by healing on the Sabbath, but by making a mud paste to do it. He committed a deed – it could be named and seen and therefore so could the sin.

So preoccupied can we become with deeds that we become blind – increasingly so – as did the religious

leaders in our gospel story. Paradoxically, the man born blind becomes increasingly able to recognize who Jesus is and those who have sight become increasingly blind as to their relationship with Jesus.

Hence, sin, in the gospel of St. John, is not about numbers or deeds but about relationship – how we see Jesus and how we see our lives in relation to Jesus. ...And that gets very, very messy. In other words, sin can be that about which we don’t even know, or are not even aware like my murderer friend who thought he had a handle on himself and on God by being able to count the bodies, unaware of the seething anger and brokenness deep within that triggered the murders in the first place.

We still find it easier to have a list of acts that constitute sin, and when that list begins to shrink, what anguish is the result? What frustration? Like the religious leaders in our gospel, they so wanted to say that there was a sin at the root of the blind man’s blindness – even that of his parents. What frustration in being unable to claim that.

Many years ago, when I was a young priest, a little girl named Lisa almost died, several times. She had been born with congenital defects of almost everything. For months, she lived with a hole in her neck so she could breathe – her parents trying to sleep at night

while listening for danger. Over the years there were, you came to admire them and love their child, whom everyone said would not live.

One evening, in bible study, Lisa's mother asked whether I thought Lisa was sick because she had done something wrong; I did not know if she meant herself or the child. I started to answer too easily and then grace stopped me. I started again, very carefully. "This is what has been shown to me that all of us, every one of us, falls so terribly far short of what God intends. There's something wrong with every one of us, terribly wrong. So, yes, Lisa sins, and you sin and I sin and all the world sins. That is why we all die, some now and some a long time from now."

Lisa's mother looked at me and then, quietly, she thanked me for I had been honest when others were not. Soon, Lisa died and at her service the organist played her favorite song, "A Spoonful of Sugar Makes the Medicine Go Down," and I wept and also, I prayed.

In another week, in our communal reconciliation service, we'll have the opportunity to name and to claim, not just our unloving choices, not just our deeds, but our blindness. Sin is easy; blindness is not. Unloving choices can be quickly named; our relationship with Jesus is far more difficult to define.

We journey to this table and to this gathering so that we might see - in bread and in wine and in one another - the very face of God.

When I was a child, I understood why the wind blows: the trees are hands I thought; when they move, the wind blows. This was perfectly clear, I felt no need to learn the truth.

Later, when I was a young man, I assumed everyone wanted to be like me and like my people; integration of others into my world was a very good

thing. Because this was perfectly clear, I felt no need to learn the truth.

Now that I am older, I do not really know what makes the wind blow, and I'm very uncertain how we will ever get together in this land. But at least I know how blind I have been and I wonder how blind I am, even now.

The Lord sets us free to see.