When I was growing up, my mother used to love the TV program “What's My Line?”

I remember sitting on the couch to watch the show in black and white on our only TV, which consisted of a small rounded screen, housed in a console across the room. As many of you will remember, “What's My Line?” had celebrity panelists who used “Yes” and “No” questions to try to determine the identity of a mystery guest. “Do you work for yourself or someone else?” “Is your business profit-making or non-profit? “Is the product you work with alive, worn or eaten?” So it would go, from panelist to panelist until they figured out who the guest was or what was his or her profession. On occasion, the show would feature a celebrity like a movie star or a sports figure and the panelists would put on blindfolds before they began their questioning.

As we progress through the book of John, it kind of feels like a 21st century version of the show, playing out on a 1st century set. Jesus appears in a new town and does what he does, leaving the audience to answer Jesus' sometimes spoken, sometimes unspoken question. “What's my line?” A man named Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night, because he senses it might not be so safe to visit Jesus during the day. “What's your line, Jesus?” Nicodemus doesn't use those exact words, but his questions serve the same purpose. When Jesus tells Nicodemus he has to be born again, he says, “What do you mean by this? How can this happen? Just exactly who are you, Jesus?” John lets Nicodemus kind of float away while Jesus reveals his identity. “I am the one God sends into the world so that no one need by destroyed by it.”

Next, John introduces us to a woman who has come to a well to draw her day's supply of water. By all accounts, the woman and Jesus really shouldn't be talking: Jesus is a man, she is a woman; he is a Jew and she a Samaritan. When Jesus promises the woman fresh, living water, she asks him, “How are you going to get this living water? What's your line, Jesus?” By the time the woman leaves Jesus, his identity has been revealed. She tells Jesus, “I know that the Messiah is coming. When he arrives, we'll get the full story.” “I am he,” Jesus tells her. “You don't have to wait any longer or look any further.” The woman takes off as if propelled by a cannon, sharing the good news back in her village.

Today, Jesus is in Jerusalem for a showdown with the Pharisees. Maybe these religious leaders are more stubborn or have more at stake, but I imagine they would not do as well as Nicodemus or the woman at the well if they all were on “What's My Line?” with Jesus as the mystery guest. These men are scholars and keepers of a faith that has been passed down to them, generation by generation. This time, the Pharisee have a dispute having to do with Jesus' healing of a man who was born blind. The very first question the Pharisees ask is who was responsible for the man's blindness. “Who sinned, Rabbi: this man or his parents, causing him to be born blind?” This man who was born blind? Are they serious? How could someone sin before he is born? But the Pharisees ***are*** serious. They are in the sin business: telling people how they should live to avoid it and what the punishment is if they don't. Jesus is quick to educate them: “You're asking the wrong question. You're looking for someone to blame. There is no cause and effect here. Look instead at what God can do.”

Then Jesus does something amazing. He spits into the dust on the street, mixes his saliva into the dirt with his hands, then rubs the paste on blind man's eyes, telling him to go and wash his face. Can you imagine the Pharisees' disgust? Whatever Jesus was doing, it was ridiculous and unsanitary. There was nothing like this in the religious rule books. The man who was blind can now see. Questions and allegations fly through town like a cyclone. Some people say the man who was healed is the beggar they saw in the streets every day. Others say no, it's an impostor. The Pharisees cast doubt about Jesus' credentials because he healed on the Sabbath. There is a split in their ranks over the whole thing.

The man's parents don't want the wrath of the Pharisees on them so they wash their hands of the whole thing, telling the Jewish leaders to talk to the man himself. That doesn't help anything. The leaders jump all over the formerly blind man and he ends up out in the street once again. When Jesus finds the man, he helps him put 2 and 2 together. The man knows a man named Jesus healed him. Now Jesus reveals himself as the Son of Man, sent from God. And the man believes. The man knows Jesus' line; he sees Jesus for who he really is. Nobody sinned and made the man blind. The man grew up blind in a hard-scrabble life, forced to beg for money since he couldn't work. When Jesus came along, the man had no idea who Jesus was and so he didn't ask for healing. But Jesus saw the man, he knew him and he healed him. Then Jesus gave the man faith so that he would believe that his healing came from God.

To reinforce his point to those who would read his gospel, John tells of Jesus' closing meeting with the Pharisees, at least on this particular occasion. Jesus tells them he has come into the world to bring everything into the clear light of day, so that those who have never seen will see and those who make a great pretense of seeing will be exposed as blind. The Pharisees play right into Jesus' hand. “Are you calling us blind?” Jesus tells them that because they claim to see everything so well, they are accountable for their every fault and failure.

What is Jesus' line? The man born blind saw it both literally and figuratively. Jesus is the one sent to bring light into the world. Jesus ***is*** the light. He was present when God made the first man out of the dust of the ground and spoke salvation into existence. When Jesus took some of that same dust to restore a blind man's sight, he revealed that God's word had taken human form in the person of Jesus. And when we hear the story, we know it is true. Jesus is the light of world, sent to save us from every shadow cast on our lives – whether we cause them ourselves or whether we did not. Eugene Peterson writes: “Jesus speaks the word and it happens: forgiveness and judgment, healing and illumination, mercy and grace, joy and love, freedom and resurrection. Everything broken and fallen, sinful and diseased, called into salvation by God's spoken word.”

God's spoken word continues to work in us, to come alive through Jesus' life: through his intimate conversation with us, his compassionate response to our need, his passionate prayer with us and for us and his sacrificial death. To open our eyes to behold Love's face. That's Jesus' line. That's why he came here and that's why he is here for the duration. So that we might be seen by him, loved by him and understood by him, forgiven by him and healed by him. So we may come to believe. And so that others may believe, too. To paraphrase Peterson: “We don't casually walk away from something like that.”

Amen.

*Lent 4A*

*March 26, 2017*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish*

*John 9:1-41*