Pastor Paul and Pastor Ann asked me for a sermon title about ten days ago. I told your venerable campus pastors that it’s difficult to title a sermon when you haven’t written one. Now, ten days later, I’m standing before you preaching a sermon I’m calling “Sin Wagon.” For those of you too young, too old, too cool, or too opposed to country music, the sermon title is a nod to a Dixie Chicks’ song by the same name.

I don’t know about y’all, but I cannot help but feel like we’re aboard one big sin wagon rolling through John’s gospel. Before we even leave the station, we hear the disciples asking Jesus to declare fault in the case of the man born without sight. They ask, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” It was a common understanding that the effects of parents’ sins visited their children. And in this intra-religious conversation, the Jewish disciples wondered if the Jewish Jesus thought the Jewish parents were to blame for their son’s inability. If it wasn’t the parents, then it had to be the man, himself. And while more difficult to substantiate, there was some midrashic speculation that one could sin in the womb.

As if that wasn’t enough sin talk, Jesus adds to the drama by working on the Sabbath. Kneading—you know the mixing of substances—was forbidden on the Sabbath. And here we see Jesus spitting on the ground, whipping up some miracle mud, and smearing it over the eyes of the man who has been kept at arm’s length by the religious community his whole life. Religious people just didn’t do that. They didn’t heal. They certainly didn’t heal on the Sabbath. No, no, religious people followed the rules.

Now, to be fair, following the rules was good for the community. Really good. The laws bound the Jewish covenant community together. It was up to the Pharisees, as the people tasked with interpreting those laws, to ensure that folks abided by the rules. Violating the Sabbath law wasn’t like breaking “interviz” at Augie; it was a big deal. By breaking the law, Jesus was challenging the very thing that held the community together. He was also challenging the Pharisees’ position of authority. It’s no wonder, then, that Jesus’ transgressions are seen by some as evidence of his distance from God. Like the man at the center of the story, Jesus is tagged with the label “sinner.”

It’s Lent—you know, the time in the church year when religious people (like us) get serious about sin. It’s the season in which Lutheran congregations sing *Create in Me a Clean Heart* like it’s going out of style. It’s the season in which “we confess that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves.” It’s also the time of the year when we practice vague piety—like the renunciation of chocolate or carbs—to combat what we’ve come to understand as sin—you know, the temptation caused by cookies, fresh baked bread, and other spiritual evils. For the record, spiritual practices can be good. Renunciation can be good. But, let’s be clear, chocolate and sin aren’t synonymous.
We laugh, but there’s a misunderstanding of great significance living behind our Lenten diets. It’s our defective definition of sin. My friend Brooks Holifield says that “for over two centuries, the American church has confused trivial matters with faithlessness—dancing, theatre, movies, jewelry, cosmetics, dominos, playing baseball on Sunday afternoon, playing anything on Sunday afternoon…” Religious Americans (let’s face it, that’s us) have found ways to preoccupy ourselves with superfluous sin. It’s safer that way, after all; if we can locate the source of sin—in things like food, entertainment, and the body—then we fix it. Or, at the very least, weed it out of our communities, so that it doesn’t taint all the good and faithful things we think we have going.

This impulse isn’t new, of course. Jesus’ disciples and the Pharisees alike are stricken with the same malady in today’s narrative. They ask: Who sinned? Are the parents to blame? Who healed? Did he spit on the Sabbath? How much mud did he really mix? Was it that guy over there? Tell us again, how did it happen? They are obsessed with behavior—with the actions that may have led them into what is nothing less than a miraculous mess.

In the few words he speaks, Jesus redirects our attention. First, he explicitly discounts any link between physical blindness and sin. There is no cause and effect here. He then inverts the definition of sin, by labeling those gathered around him with the category that they have attempted to place on him and the blind man throughout the dialogue. Sinner is defined by neither the presence of an illness nor the violation of the law, Jesus says. As New Testament scholar Gail O’Day puts it, “Sin isn’t a moral category about behavior; it is a theological category about one’s resistance to God’s revelation.”

That means that sin isn’t so much about spitting on the Sabbath as it is our want to limit the ways and places into which we believe God can and will be revealed. It was radical that God would be revealed through a man born blind, who was forbidden to step foot in the Temple because of his condition. It was radical that God would be revealed through a preacher from Galilee and his ragtag bunch of disciples. It was radical that God would make God’s self be known outside of the clean constructs and formidable frameworks that the community had agreed upon. Sin isn’t wrapped up in bad behavior, Jesus said. Sin is the failure to recognize the work of God. Sin is the propensity that we all share to limit the means by which God may choose to come close to God’s people.

Today, we honor all of you, who were nominated for Covenant Awards. This institution will cite the reasons why one of you is a particularly excellent choice for the Christian Covenant Award, and hang a medal around your neck. Several years ago, during homecoming worship, I was given this award in the Elmen Center for the Performing Arts. Many of my college friends received it, as well. Jackie Pogue, Jon Larson, and your very own Pastor Ann are just a few of my peeps, who currently have a medal sitting in their sock drawer. We’ve all talked about this award and joked about whether or not the school would have given the award to us had they really known us. (This is less of a joke for some of us…I won’t name names…Ann.) Of course, this sort of response to the award is stuck on the “sin wagon.” You know—the vehicle by which we judge our worthiness and faithfulness based on our behavior, our actions.

The call that arises out of John 9 is so much bigger than this. Today, Jesus comes to the man excluded from community and those of us with a strong campus community, to those of us nominated for awards and those of us who will never have our names read aloud on recognition day, to those of us who are breaking the rules and those of us who will die trying to follow them. Jesus comes to all of us and says, “Forget the
sin wagon; your worthiness rests in me. Come and see the radical things that God is doing through unlikely people, in unlikely places for the sake of all of creation.” It’s this ability to see that we honor today. It’s this gift we all receive from the One, who finds us and heals us and invites us to start singing a new song.

AMEN.
Community (cont’d.)
Sonora Ruybal, senior Music major from Westminster, CO.
Elise Sperling, senior Government, Social Studies Teaching and Secondary Education major from Moorhead, MN.
Emily Weber, senior Biology major from Sioux City, IA.
Krista Youngberg, senior Business Administration and Sports Management major from Sioux Falls, SD.

Service
Taylor Allis, senior Math and Secondary Education major from Wells, MN.
Anna Bahnson, senior Biology major from Hartford, SD.
Jolene Lucht, senior Biology and Psychology major from Glencoe, MN.
Lance Shaull, junior Biology major from Sioux Falls, SD.
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Worship Service
Monday, March 31, 2014
Prelude  Variations on Wondrous Love by Robert Lau       Marilyn Schempp
Invocation
Litany
(Please respond to each petition, with We Give you Thanks, O God.)

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We give you thanks, O God.

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Prayer
Song  Were You There?       Arr by Melba Williamson & Sandra Peter
Angelus directed by Lisa Grevlos

Scripture
John 9: 1-41

Sermon
Pastor Ingrid Arneson Rasmussen ’05
Covenant Award recipient, Christian Faith
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Minneapolis, MN

Hymn    Lord Jesus, You Shall Be My Song    ELW #808 vv 1-2
Presentation of the Covenant Award/Christian Faith
Laurie Jungling
Department of Religion

Lord’s Prayer
Benediction

Postlude  Stabat Mater dolorosa by G. B. Pergolesi
accompanied by Gabriel Carlisle, Matt Anderson,
Laura Wilsey, Sonora Ruybal

Angelus

WORSHIP SCHEDULE
Tues, April 1  Common Ground, 9 pm
Wed, April 2  Holy Communion, 10 am, Dan Howard
Fri, April 4  Worship Service, 10 am, Claire Bestul
Sun, April 6  Worship Service, 11 am
          Catholic Mass, 8 pm

CAMPUS MINISTRY ANNOUNCEMENTS
The PROFESSOR’S BEST LECTURE SERIES - next lecture will be given by DR DAVID O’HARA MONDAY MARCH 31 3:00 p.m. in the 3-in-1 Room Morrison Commons. Dr. O’Hara’s lecture is titled, “Atheism for Lent: Varieties of Modern Atheism, and Why Christians Should Care.” Sometimes we talk about atheism as though it were one thing, but really there are a number of atheisms, each with its own aims and justifications. This talk will give an overview of several forms of modern atheism and why Christians ought to care about the differences.

THE BIRTHDAY CLUB is a new opportunity to integrate faith and service. If your birthday is in the month of March or April, you are invited to donate diapers, wipes, toilet paper, or laundry soap to Necessities for Neighbors, a distribution of hygiene products to people in need. You can also volunteer to serve at Necessities for Neighbors on Sunday, April 6. April birthdays will be blessed on Sun, April 6.

Interested students are invited to a two day INTERFAITH CONFERENCE at Augustana Rock Island June 1-3. Speakers include Eboo Patel and presiding bishop Elizabeth Eaton. No cost; transportation from Sioux Falls is included. If interested, see Pr. Paul or Pr Ann.

Nominees for the Covenant Awards

Christian Faith
Allie Hjerpe, senior English & Journalism major from Hutchinson, MN
Jenna Kuhle, senior Biology major from Howard, SD

Liberal Arts
Anna Bahnson, senior Biology major from Hartford, SD.
Julia Blue, senior Biology major from Sioux Falls, SD.
Kade Klippenstein, senior Biology major from Hot Springs, SD.
Mason Maxwell, senior Philosophy major from Sioux Falls, SD.
Crystal Ortbahn, senior English major from Pierre, SD.
Mallory Schulte, interim 2014 graduate who majored in Gov’t. and International Affairs.
Mason Voehl, senior Philosophy major from Windom, MN.
Michael Vos, senior History, Secondary Education and Special Education major from Brookings, SD.

Excellence
Joe Bernstein, senior Math &Economics major from White Bear Lake, MN.
Kirsten Bluhm, senior Biochem & Psychology major from Red Wing, MN.
Emily Grandprey, senior Biology major from Windom, MN.
Alexandra Hjerpe, senior Journalism & English major from Hutchinson, MN.
Matthew Housiaux, junior Journalism & History major from Brookings, SD.
Amanda Johnson, senior Biochemistry major from Sioux Falls, SD.
Jessica Johnson, senior Biology major from Sioux Falls, SD.
Peter Meyer, senior Accounting and Philosophy major from Sioux Falls, SD.
Austin Mielke, senior German major from Brandon, SD.
Crystal Ortbahn is a senior English major from Pierre, SD.
Andrew Paulson, senior Music Education major from Jackson, MN.
Kayla Seeger, senior Communication/Business and Spanish major from Milford, IA.
September Symens, junior English and Journalism major from Omaha, NE.
Ruthellen (Elle) Tornberg, senior Biochemistry major from Harrisburg, SD.

Community
Matt Anderson, senior Biology major from Sioux Falls, SD.
Emily Grandprey, senior Biology major from Windom, MN.
Jayne Hess, senior Elementary and Deaf Education major from Bemidji, MN.

(continued on other side)
Presentation of the Covenant Award/Christian Faith

Laurie Jungling
Department of Religion

Lord’s Prayer

Benediction

Postlude  Stabat Mater dolorosa by G. B. Pergolesi
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