

MARK 10:46-52

⁴⁶They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. ⁴⁷When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" ⁴⁸Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" ⁴⁹Jesus stood still and said, "Call him here." And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart; get up, he is calling you." ⁵⁰So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. ⁵¹Then Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" The blind man said to him, "My teacher, let me see again." ⁵²Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

Crying Out

October 28, 2018

In 2012 during the presidential parade for Barak Obama and Joe Biden, Al Roker, the well-known weather man for NBC news, was standing along the parade route waving at the presidential party as it went by. He was hoping someone would break ranks and come over and say "Hello". He would call them out by name and wave his arms but no one noticed. There were other commentators telling us that this was not an acceptable way to do things; completely against protocol, but Al persisted. No one would give him the time of day until Vice president Joe Biden came by. He rushed over to where Al was standing and shook his hand and said 'Hello Al!' Isn't that just like Joe Biden? Al Roker was stunned! It was one of the most thrilling moments in his life and career. And I'm pretty sure Al wouldn't have known what to say if Vice President Biden had said "Al, What do you want me to do for you?"

Our lesson today from Mark's Gospel is so rich with ideas and images and truth that there are easily a hundred sermons in it. I'm hopeful that I'll still be preaching when this reading comes around again because there is much to get us thinking. George Burns said, "The secret of a good sermon is to have a good beginning and a good ending and having the two as close together as possible." So I'll do my best to make that happen today.

As I mentioned last week this is the bookend of a story that began back in Chapter 7 where Jesus healed another blind man. That man had no name, unlike our good Bartimaeus today. He had to heal him twice to get the job done, which may be a statement on just how difficult it was for those following Jesus to see who he really was and what he was really about.

He has told the disciples three times that he was going to Jerusalem and the fate that awaited him there. They don't seem to understand though, no matter how clearly he tells them. They don't see. Which is the point of the story I guess. They misunderstand all along the way and our story this morning is powerful when understood in this context. Seeing and sight are more than just about physical sight but about understanding as well. Being able to see has many meanings doesn't it? Sometimes seeing can mean, understanding, realizing, perceiving, comprehending, getting it, get the drift of, or get the message. How often have you heard someone say, "Oh, I See." It can mean to pay a visit or call on someone. It can mean, to think it over or reflect on, to be a witness to something. It can mean, imagining, picturing, and envisioning. The meanings are numerous aren't they? And mean much more than just physical sight. That doesn't mean this isn't a healing story, it is, but it is also something else as well.

Mark makes a contrast between those who see and those who don't. He particularly makes a point of letting the disciples show us, and maybe his own congregation, what it looks like when we don't understand or see things correctly. They have been going on and on about who will be first in the kingdom, who will sit on the left or the right of Jesus' royal throne, who will have gotten what they deserve for their dedication and sacrifice to him.

They shoo children away, they try to get this loud mouth to shut up, and they complain about a lot of things. And right now it's safe to say they don't get it. They will. But for right now, they need their vision adjusted and it takes a poor, desperate blind character in our story to do that.

I found a story shared by William G. Carter about a woman who received similar eyes to see. "A few years ago, this woman, with the help of Presbyterian mission money, helped to establish a halfway house for women who are recovering drug addicts. She schedules twelve-step groups, arranges for child care, and generally tries to get the women back on their feet. In a lot of ways, you would never expect her to be involved with such work. She is even-tempered, gentle, and articulate. But something happened a few years ago that caused her to see anew.

She was a graduate school student in Pittsburgh, looking for a part-time job. A newspaper listed an administrative position with a soup kitchen. That looked interesting, so she clipped it and prepared for the interview. On the day of her interview, she put on a dark blue business suit, put together a manila folder full of resumes and references, and clipped back her hair.

Arriving a few minutes before noon, she saw the sign: "East End Cooperative Ministry." She knocked on the door. Someone inside said, "It's unlocked." She went in, only to find a long line of people in front of her. Disappointment washed over her. Then she realized it was lunch time. The people in the line weren't there for the same interview, they were waiting for soup.

She grew nervous as she looked at the people in line. Some of them, in turn, looked at her. She felt self-conscious about the way she was dressed. Apparently others began to sense her anxiety. A woman in a moth-eaten sweater smiled and tried to make conversation. "Is this your first time here?"

"Yes, it is."

"Don't worry," said the lady in the sweater, "it gets easier."

"The scales fell from my eyes that day," reflected the young woman. "I went there looking for a job, and that woman thought I was there for soup. As far as she knew, the world had been as cruel to me as it was to her. But in the kindest way she could, she welcomed me as a fellow human being. She saw me as someone equally in need, which I was and still am. I didn't realize it at the time, but that was the day when God began to convert me." Looking around the halfway house where she now works, she smiled and said, "You see all of these wonderful things God is doing here? They began when God gave us eyes to see where Jesus was leading us."

Open the eyes of my heart Lord, Open the eyes of my heart, I want to see you. I want to see you...

Bartimaeus, when asked what Jesus could do for him says, "Let me see again." Let me see...Again. There is something powerful for me in this statement. It speaks to me of one who used to see clearly but somehow along the way, lost his sight, lost his vision, lost his understanding of what life with God is all about. This is metaphor of course, but none the less powerful for it. It may even be a metaphor for the nation of Israel that Jesus had come to point back to God. They, who once knew clearly how to be in relationship with God, have somehow lost their way, lost their vision. Not only for themselves, but for others.

And oh, how I understand that for myself, having lived a few years on this planet. How I have gone from one who saw clearly to one who couldn't see the forest for the trees. How the choices of my life blinded me to what was good and holy and right. I too, put up walls and stumbling blocks. Destroyed the clarity of my sight until I too remember sitting on the side of the road crying out, 'Have Mercy on Me, Jesus!' Help me to see...Again! This is in many ways a calling story. A story of one man, who in the fullness of despair, knows that there is no one who can help but the One sent from God.

And in the midst of our most desperate awakenings, Jesus stands still and listens. And then He calls us to come and follow him. Just as he has been calling his disciples and all those he healed.

And can you imagine in your mind this morning what it must have been like for Bartimaeus to know that in the midst of all that turmoil and noise and confusion; bodies moving and trudging along the dusty road that Jesus stopped and stood still. That Jesus heard him. And he hears you and me as well. He says, “Bring him to me. Bring Jim to me. Bring Mary to me. Bring Rebecca to me. Bring _____ to me.” He calls and then you stand before him and he looks you in the eyes, those blind eyes, those eyes that have been closed to the truth of your own life, and asks, “What do you want me to do for you? What do you want me to do for you?”

How will you respond? What will you ask? Do you want to see...again? Do you want to be like the disciples to sit as his right or left? Do you want to be healed? Do you want to inherit eternal life? Are you ready to cast off the heavy cloak like Bartimaeus did, that cloak that has been the way of your life, and spring up to something new? What is it that keeps you from seeing the truth about yourself or the truth about Jesus? This is something that happens over and over again in our lives.

For Jesus is calling even now. He is saying come over here and let's talk about what it is that you need to let go of, so you can see clearly. Is it doubt? Is it fear? Is it change? And do you have the courage to cry out? Because if you do, I guarantee you will get his attention! Or would you rather sit on the side of the road and continue as you have been? Well, Cry out, I say! Let him know your need. Let him hear your voice. And when he stands still in the crowded ways of your life let his gaze and voice call you to him. Stand or kneel before him and listen when he asks you, “What do you want me to do for you?” So far, whatever was asked for was given. And what will you answer? What will you answer? I invite you to do it right now. We'll just take a moment, and close your eyes if you will, and hear Jesus ask, “What do you want me to do for you?” (Silence)

And when you regain your spiritual sight the natural response is to follow Jesus. Something the disciples and the rest of us are still struggling with. At least in this story.

And I think the most interesting thing to me is that in Mark's gospel it seems that those who recognize who Jesus is, are those who are on the fringes. They are the ones who are outcasts, untouchable, outsiders, the others; all those who sit at the side of the roads of life, crying for help. And one only needs to turn on the news to hear the cries of those who have been relegated to the dusty sidelines of life. And I want to cry out with them. Don't you? “Jesus, have mercy on us!” But often it seems that the world and even the church would rather they be quiet. In our fear of what might happen or what we might need to do about it, we say, “Hush! Shush up! Hold it down! Don't draw attention to yourself or your need.” But it is their cries for help that remind us who Jesus is. Jesus is the one who heals, who comforts, who feeds and sets free. He gives his life a ransom for many and then says, “follow me.” And he calls us to be his hands and feet in the world so that all those who cry out will be heard and cared for in his name.

Yes, when we finally have our vision restored we want to follow Jesus just as old brother Bart did. Who, rather than go his own way, chose to follow. “Your way is my way” he might have said. “A life of service and love for others. Now I see it!” That's what often happens when one encounters Jesus face to face. I know we will sing this hymn in a minute, but the words are just so powerful that I want to read the first verse to you. And ask you to try and hear it as if Jesus were asking as he says, *“Will you come and follow me if I but call your name? Will you go where you don't know and never be the same? Will you let my love be shown; will you let my name be known; will you let my life be grown in you and you in me?* O, I would dearly love to hear your answer. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen. 726—Will You Come and Follow Me