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 Text: Mark 10:46-52

But Now I See

I

Bartimaeus turned his head to hear the chatter. From a distance it sounded like a gaggle of geese, but he had been blind long enough that he could discern the difference between fowl and human voices. This was definitely a crowd of people, chatting noisily as they moved down the road. He was seated in his usual spot on the outskirts of Jericho. Every day he must sit there and beg for alms from travelers headed to Jerusalem for commerce or worship, hoping to catch them in a generous mood. He depended on the coins people dropped into his well-worn cloak.

“It must be that rabbi from Nazareth,” he thought. Word had spread about this man who cured lepers, healed the deaf, and tamed storms.

Dust stirred up by the crowd now wafted his way and settled on his already grimy cloak. Bartimaeus hollered, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.” No one seemed to notice. As the crowd drew closer, he hollered louder, “Son of David, have mercy on me.” This time, several folks told him to hush up. But he didn’t stop. He hollered again, loudly. More angry voices scolded him. A foot nudged him, communicating the same message: Be quiet.

But then the crowd grew silent as Jesus stopped and instructed them to call the blind beggar forward. “Take heart, get up; he’s calling you.”

Bartimaeus couldn’t get up fast enough. Looking into those sightless eyes, Jesus asked Bartimaeus, “What do you want me to do for you?”

“My teacher, let me see again.”

Jesus said, “Your faith has made you well,” and Bartimaeus’s dark world burst into technicolor.

It’s the last miracle Jesus performs in Mark, a gospel filled with stories of Jesus restoring people to health.

Do you remember those mission films they used to show in Sunday School? I saw one in the early 80s about Presbyterian mission work in India. It made an indelible impression on me, as I still remember one scene. It was a make-shift clinic in a village. People were lined up to receive care. An ophthalmologist was performing cataract surgeries. As soon as one patient got up from the cot, another replaced him. Thus it went all day, assembly-line fashion. In the name of Jesus, many, many people received their sight.

And so, we can read our gospel lesson this morning through a literal lens, if you will, the lens of Bartimaeus receiving a physical healing, his sight restored. That’s what we call the plain meaning of the text. Christians have read the gospels this way and in response have founded from earliest times hospitals, medical missions, and caring agencies of all kinds the world over.

So, reading it this way, the story of Bartimaeus asks us, *In what ways are we carrying on Jesus' ministry of healing and wholeness?*

II

What's so fascinating to me is that there's always more than one way to read a Bible story, more than one lens to use, more than one way to see it. And so, let me suggest second reading. This is a metaphorical reading. Read this way, seeing is a metaphor for faith. Physical sight is symbolic of spiritual insight. "I see," we say when we mean, "I understand."

Bartimaeus's story comes at the end of a section in Mark bracketed on the front end with another story of Jesus healing a blind man. That one is a two-step healing. Jesus put spit on the blind man's eyes, laid hands on him, and asked, "Can you see anything?"

"I can see people," he replied, "But they look like trees walking."

So, Jesus laid hands on him a second time. This time, he saw everything clearly.

In between these two healing-blind-men stories, the disciples repeatedly fail to see anything. They just don't understand what Jesus is all about. Some wag has quipped that in the Gospel of Mark they are the "*duh*-sciples." Jesus, in this section predicts three times that he will suffer, be rejected, killed, and rise again. But the disciples just don't get it. The first time, Peter could not believe what Jesus said could possibly be true and rebuked Jesus. The second time Mark says none of the disciples understood what Jesus meant and were afraid to ask. After the third time, James and John want Jesus to let them sit at his right and left hand in his glory. "You don't know what you're asking," Jesus told them. They had no idea about drinking the cup he—and they—must drink and being baptized with the baptism (the baptism of death) he—and they—must undergo.

There are other instances of the disciples' blindness in this section. For example, an argument breaks out among the twelve about who is the greatest. Jesus has to give them a children's sermon, literally, about humility, by placing a child in their midst. Over and over the disciples don't understand.

And then we come to Bartimaeus, the last story Mark tells before Jesus comes to Jerusalem and begins his last week on earth, Holy Week, we call it, the week of his passion and resurrection which will finally make clear his mission. We come to Bartimaeus who, in a metaphorical way, is a model disciple, a disciple who does "see." He "sees" who Jesus is, even before his eyes are healed. He identifies him as the Son of David, which is to say the Messiah, descended from King David, sent by God to save the people. Bartimaeus "sees" Jesus as one who can help him, who has the power to overcome what impedes his life. Bartimaeus is persistent in his cry for mercy. He will not be dissuaded by those who try to silence him. When called to Jesus, he springs up and throws off his cloak, Mark says. Now Mark is skimpy when it comes to details so when he mentions one (like the cloak), we take note. The cloak, we can say, is a symbol of Bartimaeus's old life. He ditches his cloak: no longer to be a blind beggar, his life is about to be changed. When asked what he wants, Bartimaeus, the model disciple, doesn't waver. He confidently asks for his sight restored. "Go," Jesus tells him, "your faith--*your faith*—has made you well. Your *faith* has saved you." Faith is a way of seeing the world, a way of understanding life as living in the kingdom of God where seemingly impossible things happen, where true power is found in humility, where sacrifice is the currency

of love.

Bartimaeus then follows Jesus, Mark says, “on the way.” Bartimaeus is a follower of the Way, which is what the early Christians were called, we learn from the book of Acts.¹ And that Way leads, as readers of the gospel we know, from Jericho, to Jerusalem, to the cross.

“I once was blind, but now I see.” Bartimaeus could have written the line from the hymn. But he didn’t. John Newton wrote it. Newton was born in 1725. In his early life he served in the British Royal Navy and captained three different ships in the African slave trade. He later described himself as an infidel and pagan. When he was twenty-three he experienced a terrible storm off the coast of Ireland when his ship almost sank. His fervent prayers were answered, thus beginning his conversion to evangelical Christianity.

From then on, he no longer swore, gambled, or drank, though it was years before he quit investing in the slave trade. He became a serious student of the Bible, applied to be a minister, and was eventually ordained in the Anglican Church. He was a popular preacher, able pastor, and prolific hymn writer. One hymn he titled, “Faith’s Review and Expectation.” We know it by its first two words, “Amazing Grace.”

When he was sixty-three, Newton broke a long silence and published a pamphlet deploring the conditions of slave ships and confessing his regret in ever profiting from slavery. From infidel slave trader to abolitionist, Newton, like Bartimaeus, went from blindness to clear-sighted faith.

The religious journal *The Christian Century* had a long-running series of articles by famous theologians and scholars titled “How My Mind Has Changed.”

Using this second lens to read it, the story of Bartimaeus asks us, *How has our faith caused us to see things differently?*

III

I’d like to suggest a third lens we can hold up to Mark’s story, one other way of seeing it. We can see the story through the eyes of each character in it. We’ve already done this in a way. Seeing it as a healing story, we’ve identified with Jesus in his healing ministry. Seeing it as narrative where sight is a metaphor for faith, we’ve identified with Bartimaeus. But what about those folks in the crowd?

Step for a moment into the sandals of the men and women and kids from Jericho who joined the throng following Jesus. You want to be with this popular rabbi. You feel a bit smug, even, to be in his company. You are walking along, chatting with others who want to be numbered among his companions. And then there’s an annoying voice that grows louder and louder. It belongs to that outsider who sits on the outskirts of town. It’s the blind beggar Bartimaeus. He’s hollering, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.” Someone says, “Hey, Bart, pipe down.” But he won’t shut up. He turns up the volume. Doesn’t he know his place? “Son of David, have mercy on me.” He’s so obnoxious! “Be quiet!” you shout, then try to ignore him. He’s waving his stick around to get attention. His smelly, ragged cloak and haunted, milky eyes repulse you. Others scold him. Then Jesus stops. He turns to the crowd and, looking straight at *you*, says, “Call him here.”

And so, you can no longer dismiss Bartimaeus.

We, the followers of Jesus, can no longer dismiss Bartimaeus, the one we want to

distance ourselves from, the one who makes us uncomfortable, the one in need of Jesus' healing and support. We insiders cannot just bask in the company of Jesus and other insiders. We cannot focus solely on our programs, picnics, and committee plans, good as they are. Jesus calls us to turn our attention to the one on the margin, the scorned, the misunderstood. Notice that Jesus doesn't reprimand the crowd for their lack of compassion. He doesn't lecture them about hospitality and inclusion. Instead he commands the crowd, us, the church, to invite Bartimaeus in, to become the disciples we would not be without this act of obedience.

Ken Parker was a grand dragon in the KKK, but decided the Klan wasn't hateful enough so joined the ranks of the neo-Nazis. Last year he rallied with the white nationalists in Charlottesville. But since then, Ken Parker has undergone a dramatic transformation, a healing. He was baptized, joined a church—a black church—, and had his swastika and other racist tattoos removed.

A crucial part of Parker's healing was the members of the crowd, as it were, who called him to Jesus. The first, ironically, was Deeyah Khan, a female Muslim journalist who was in Charlottesville filming a documentary on hate groups. She showed him extraordinary kindness and respect which got him thinking. A few months later he met William McKinnon by the pool at his apartment complex. He, too, was kind and respectful. Their discussions led to an invitation to come to McKinnon's church on Easter. The seventy-member African American congregation of All Saints Holiness Church accepted Parker without judgment, so he kept coming. A month later when he told them about his past, "a lot of them, their jaws about hit the floor and their eyes got real big," Parker recalled. "But after the service," he said, "not a single one of them had anything negative to say. They're all coming up and hugging me and shaking my hand, you know, building me up instead of tearing me down."ⁱⁱ

So, the story of Bartimaeus when viewed through the lens of the crowd asks us, *How are we reaching out and calling to Jesus people we would just as soon have nothing to do with?*

Three lenses. Three questions. How do you see it?

ⁱ Acts 9:2

ⁱⁱ <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/susanwright/2018/08/a-year-after-charlottesville-a-former-neo-nazi-trades-hate-for-the-love-of-god/> on October 25, 2018