

“To See Again Better... As Before”

By Rev. Elizabeth D. McLean, Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church

10-14-18

Based upon Mark 10:46-52; Hebrews 4:12-15

In the midst of our conflicts, and underlying our collective outrage these days, there is a yearning in our country and in much of the world. Have you felt it too? As much as we all want our side, whatever that side is, to win, and as much as we are sure with every fiber of our being that our views of the world are the right ones not the wrong ones, there is still a deep longing in the hearts of many for a time when we were not so preoccupied with winning and saw each other differently. We yearn for that time when we saw some of our dearest friends and family just as Betty or Steve, our sister-in-law or father-in-law, not as people who voted for the one we hate, or who believe things that we now find incomprehensible or wrong. We yearn for a time when we saw the people on our streets as allies, people in our towns as neighbors, and people in our country as people “like us,” even though we know intellectually they weren’t really like us. We did not all agree, and were not all the same back then, whenever our “then” was – two years ago, twenty, or seventy. We know that everything was not perfect. There were plenty of people who were labeled and limited in cruel and unjust ways then too. But notwithstanding those facts, it still feels as if there was a time not too long ago when people saw the world and each other with fewer labels, or related to each other more positively despite the labels. Our differences were not deal-breakers and relationship-killers, and the world seemed safer and brighter somehow. Now the cataracts caused by fear-stoked-by-change, and outrage-stoked-by-fear, and partisanship-stoked-by-outrage have made it almost impossible for us to see each other as we used to, and even to see facts the same way. If only we could just see as we did before, then maybe we wouldn’t be so divided, and maybe we would be able to solve our problems instead of making them worse.

Bartimaeus, the focus of today’s Gospel lesson, used to be able to see better too. We know this because he told Jesus that he wanted to “see again” not “to see for the first time.” What had robbed him of his sight is anyone’s guess. Maybe he had some kind of accident; maybe he developed a disease like macular degeneration, or viral meningoencephalitis, (which was the disease that caused Mary Ingalls of Little House on the Prairie-fame to go blind by the way.) Maybe Bartimaeus had just developed cataracts as he aged like people still do today. Artists tend to depict him as old. Whatever happened to make Bartimaeus go blind, it changed his life. Without an ancient ADA-equivalent to enable him to get a job, or a seeing-eye dog to help him do a job, without laser eye-surgery or even a Braille alphabet, all he could really do in those days was sit by the side of the road, put out his cloak, and beg for alms.

Knowing that is enough to make us feel sorry for him. But in this story, he’s not the one who is in trouble or in need of pity because blindness hadn’t dulled all of Bartimaeus’ senses. In fact, it had strengthened the rest of them, his spiritual sense included. So although there were plenty of people who weren’t sure of what to make of Jesus, and plenty who just wanted Bartimaeus to shut up and stop embarrassing them, when he heard Jesus in Jericho, he kept crying out “Son of David have mercy on me” until Jesus came over and gave him what he wanted. Jesus enabled him to see again. Yet his renewed sight was not exactly the same as it was

before because instead of making him lovingly embrace his old life in Jericho, Bartimaeus' new sight made him leap up and follow Jesus into an as-yet barely visible, but nevertheless promising new future.

There is no question that Mark included this story in his Gospel in part to demonstrate that Jesus could work miracles. Not even the best healers in those days could restore people's vision. So this miracle was like a neon sign pointing to Jesus' divinity. Moreover, since people back then believed that blindness was caused by sin, either the person's or his parents', this kind of miracle helped Mark's readers to know that Jesus came to use his divine power to forgive as well as heal. But Mark conveyed the same message two chapters earlier when Jesus healed another blind man in two stages. So why tell a second blind man story? Given how much of a hurry to get to the Passion Mark appears to be in his gospel, it seems a little redundant, if not to say wasteful of him to spend so much time on making the same point.

If we look closely at the text, however, we see that this lesson conveys a slightly different point than the other blind man story. It is as much or more about human sight, as it is about divine power and miracles. Bartimaeus' story invites us to consider how our understanding of the world, ourselves, and others is blind to what matters, and how the way that God sees us in Christ can change that. The first of the details that helps to reveal this lesson is the name of the beggar in question, whom Mark calls "Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus." That description is just plain bizarre because in Hebrew and Aramaic, "bar" means "son of;" so Mark effectively said, the beggar was "Son of Timaeus, son of Timaeus." Now parents can sometimes have a cruel sense of humor when they name their children; I grew up with a boy who was actually named Randolph Randolph. But in this case, the duplication is in Mark's description of the beggar, not in his actual name. So either Mark felt that he needed to translate the name for his Gentile audience for some reason, or more likely, since Mark rarely named the people that Jesus healed, Mark gave the man this name, or described him this way, in order to make sure that the name Timaeus caught our attention.

There are two reasons he might have wanted to do this. One was to contrast the vision we obtain through God's grace, with vision we obtain through human efforts. You see, there was a famous Platonic dialogue between Socrates and someone called Timaeus about sight. In it, Timaeus argues that the reason we have sight is so that we can understand the world. God gave humanity eyes to see so that we could study the stars and learn from them how to "regulate our own vagaries."¹ Mark might have wanted to emphasize that when the beggar is healed and throws off his cloak to follow Jesus, he is throwing off the limited knowledge of the world we obtain from human investigation of the universe, and embracing instead the knowledge of the world we gain through God's grace.

The second reason Mark may have emphasized the beggar's name was to highlight the difference between how God perceived the beggar and how the people of Jericho did. Timaeus in Greek means "honored" or "worthy." But in Greek it also sounds very close to the word for

¹ As quoted in Guthrie, Suzanne, "Soulwork Toward Sunday: Self-Guided Retreat Proper 25 (Year B) "Blind Bartimaeus," At the Edge of the Enclosure Blog, <http://www.edgeofenclosure.org/proper25b.html>; for the complete dialogue go to: <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/timaeus.html>

“rebuked” or “unclean” because they are derived from the same root. So like the physics thought-experiment known as “Schrodinger’s cat,” in which the cat is simultaneously dead and alive in a box until someone looks at it and rules out one choice, the beggar by name was both “a worthy son,” and “a rebuked son,” until Jesus looked upon him and made it clear that he was the former not the latter. Although the beggar was blind, he could see the truth about Jesus when others couldn’t, and although the crowd thought the beggar was a sinner, Jesus could see the truth that he was worthy when they couldn’t.

We don’t know which of these Timaeus points Mark intended to make, but both of them suggest that we gain different understandings about ourselves and our world when we allow Jesus to enable us to “see again.” The verbs for sight in this text support this understanding. There are several Greek verbs for seeing. The most common one is *bleppo*. But when Jesus sees, particularly in the context of his working miracles or saving people who have been labeled by society, like Zacchaeus the tax collector, Mark uses a different verb, “*anableppo*” which literally means “to see again,” but figuratively also means “to see as God sees.” The blind man Jesus heals in Chapter 8 sees this way, and Bartimaeus does too after he is healed. He sees again, but not as one who sees the world in an ordinary way. He sees the world as God in Christ sees it, and therefore eagerly leaves behind his beggar’s cloak to follow him.

If only Jesus could do the same for us, right? If we could just see again better as we did before sin and anger and fear blinded us, if only we could just see again as God sees us and the world, then we too could leave behind the labels, limitations, and outrage, and follow Jesus’ way into the future. But without being able to encounter Jesus as the blind man did, how can we? Well, according to our Reformed Tradition, the answer is that we allow Scripture to do for us what Christ did for the beggar. John Calvin, the founding father of Presbyterianism, said that the Scriptures “are like spectacles for weak, failing eyes.” Summarizing Calvin’s theology on Scripture and sight, author/theologian John Burgess explained, “Without Scriptures we see only a world in chaos, driven by human ambition and failure. God’s plans and purposes are blurry and hardly detectable. But if we put on the Scriptures and really look through them, allowing them to refocus our vision, God’s saving work in Christ becomes crystal clear. We no longer see a world abandoned to its own devices, but see, rather, God’s transforming love, which brings good out of evil and hope out of despair.”²

The lesson from *Hebrews* today conveys this same message but uses surgical rather than optical imagery. “God’s word is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joint from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render account.” At first this passage can sound like a terrifying threat because it makes it sound as if we are lying vulnerable on a table about to be sacrificed for our sins. But the “laid bare” imagery doesn’t have to be interpreted sacrificially. It can also be interpreted medically. If you picture that same table as a gurney in an operating room, and God’s Word like a scalpel in the hands of the Holy Spirit, then this text becomes less scary and more encouraging. God is like a surgeon who can see what is wrong with us. Rather than killing us

² As quoted in *Daily Feast: Meditations from Feasting on the Word, Year B*, Kathleen Long Bostrom and Elizabeth F. Caldwell, Eds., (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 497.

because we are broken, God works through the Word, which is both Scripture and Christ, to heal us. Like an eye surgeon, God in Christ carefully removes our cataracts to help us to see ourselves better. Like a heart surgeon uses stents, God uses Scripture to clear the blockages that keep our hearts from being faithful. We need not fear this process, the author of *Hebrews* continues, because God isn't dissecting us as if we are lowly creatures like frogs. God in Christ understands our weaknesses and is trying to heal us, not harm us. Therefore, we cry out to Christ in prayer, and search for truth in Scripture knowing that we will receive mercy and grace and healing.

Now we all know that there are people who misuse God's Word in Scripture to label and to harm others. Those who judged Bartimaeus probably did so because they thought their Scriptures told them to do so. But if we truly open ourselves up to the work of the Spirit by laying ourselves bare for the Surgeon, and if we study the Word of God carefully instead of simply seeing in it what we want to see, then like Bartimaeus, we can begin to see ourselves and our world again in a new way, as Christ does. That's why we are pushing *Faith 5* so much. Dwell in the Word regularly and thoughtfully, and you will see in Christ that God loves us as we are. So even though others may judge us, and even though we may see only our disabilities not our abilities, God sees us as sons and daughters and wants to make us whole. Dwell in Scripture humbly, and you will discover that God in Christ loves others as they are too, even if they do bad things, even if their politics are terrible in our minds. Scripture leads us to Christ, who teaches us that if we want to be able see again as we did before, when we were able to see friends and neighbors and kindred spirits instead of enemies, lost causes, and threats, then we have to allow God's grace to remove the cataracts of fear in our eyes, and replace them with God's lens of love.

There is one downside to doing this that the Bartimaeus story doesn't explain. When you first begin to see as Christ sees, the world looks worse, not better. The brokenness, greed, and hate in the world are so glaringly visible that seeing it can cause pain. All surgeries come with some post-op pain and discomfort, after all. But by the grace of God, even in the midst of the pain-inducing ugliness we can also see the hope-inducing promise we couldn't see it before, and that's enough to enable us to move forward as Bartimaeus did. It's a process of steadily moving from blindness into sight, from brokenness into wholeness, from fear into love.

According to linguists, even in Jesus' day, in Semitic languages, the idiom "to be blind" meant to be hardened, inflexible, or adamant in one's position, just as it does today. We live during a time when many people are blind in this way, not just to God's grace in the world but also to God's grace in others. We don't have to stay that way, however. By the mercy of God, Jesus is continuously asking us, "What do you want me to do for you?" hoping that we will ask to see again like Bartimaeus did, (not for special privileges that elevate us over others like James and John did in the chapter right before today's lesson.) It's not too late for us all to see again better. Let the Word of God we call Jesus Christ, and the word of God we call Scripture dwell in you richly. Let Jesus' way inform your understanding of the world instead of the world informing your understanding of Christ and others, and God willing, we all will soon be able to move forward out of pain and into a brighter and safer future. Amen.