

Our Gospel passage seems rather short, and yet there is so much there to explore. To appreciate the richness of this passage, it may help to inhabit it and to look at it from a variety of perspectives - it is a story about sight after all, about the ability to see on both the physical and metaphorical levels.

The characters in this morning's reading are of course, Jesus, his disciples, a large crowd and Bartimaeus. The setting is Jericho, an ancient town even in Jesus time, not very far from Jerusalem. Within the Gospel narrative, Mark is completing his telling of the Galilean ministry and is turning toward Jerusalem. During the Galilean ministry, there have been many healings, and the first and last healing have to do with restoring sight to the blind. This last healing has some significant differences: it is the only healing that names the suffering party and it is the only healing where the healed becomes a follower of Jesus.

Jesus has been continually interrupted on his journey by those who seek his help. It has happened so often that it makes one wonder if Jesus came to expect it and even welcome it. From a narrative perspective, these interruptions create the story that needs telling for the good news of the Gospel is not about getting from point A to point B in the most

expeditious manner possible, it is about the journey and the transformation that occurs along the way.

Consider the events as they unfold in this particular healing story. Jesus and his disciples are leaving Jericho - they are probably walking and talking in the middle of the road. With them are a large crowd. They probably surround Jesus and the disciples, straining to hear the conversation. This crowd has heard of Jesus, they are aware of his healing abilities, they have either observed or heard about his teachings, they are taken with this charismatic Jewish teacher. If you are Jesus and the disciples, engaged in conversation as you move toward Jerusalem, surround by a crowd, are you likely to notice the beggar by the road side? Not very likely.

Yet this beggar has heard the conversation of the crowd and, discovering who is walking by, calls out to Jesus. This is annoying for those in the crowd, because if the beggar keeps yelling and calling, how can they hear what Jesus has to say? Some might be annoyed that a beggar, a social outcast, a nobody has the timarity to call out to a man such as Jesus. Others might be annoyed at the distraction, they want their focus to be on Jesus, not some bum. "Shut up!" those in the crowd say. Perhaps

they say it more rudely - yet Bartimaeus persists, calling out even more loudly.

And Jesus stood still. I imagine that this had to be a comedic moment. What happens when a group of people are moving as one and suddenly someone stops? That someone gets plowed into, right? After the jostling stops, with all those people around him, Jesus says "call him here."

Now the crowd has a change of heart. Perhaps some are delighted - "hey," they call out, "get up, he is calling you!" And as sometimes happens with a crowd, they act as one, clearing a path between Bartimaeus and Jesus. Bartimaeus jumps up - he throws off his cloak - perhaps his only possession, perhaps it marks him as a beggar so he is metaphorically throwing off what he has become as he eagerly, if blindly, moves forward to new possibilities, to new life. And then Jesus asks Bartimaeus the same question we heard Jesus ask James and John last week "What do you want me to do for you?"

The question should stop us in our tracks for at least two reasons: What Bartimaeus wants should be patently obvious. Why doesn't Jesus immediately grasp this? Mark wants us to notice that this IS the same question posed to James and John, and to pay attention to the differences

in the two responses. Recall that James and John want places of honor when Jesus comes into his Kingdom. They desire the ability to be superior, akin to our desire to be successful and sophisticated. Bartimaeus has no problem responding to the obvious, and makes his respectful request to have his deepest need met. Even though blind, Bartimaeus correctly identifies Jesus as a “Son of David,” appropriately identifying him as the fulfillment of God’s covenant with David. This contrasts with the 12 in general and Peter specifically. Remember that poor Peter correctly identifies that Jesus is the Messiah but does not understand how Jesus is the Messiah, he thinks as a man and does not possess God’s frame of reference. In Mark, the disciples are hopelessly out of step with what Jesus is trying to tell them. They are the Keystone Kops or Three Stooges of their time.

As an aside, I hope we take comfort in the disciples’ missteps and mistakes. They are part of Jesus inner circle, yet they keep getting the message wrong. In the context of this story, we are to see that it is really the disciples who are afflicted with blindness - and we are too - we all have our blind spots. And that’s okay. We can still be close to Jesus despite our own lack of understanding and our own blindness.

Back to the story, Jesus tells Bartimaeus what he tells all those who are healed, “Go; your faith has made you well.” Jesus does more than restore Bartimaeus’s sight, he restores his standing in the community, he removes his isolation. Notice, however, that Bartimaeus does not obey Jesus’ command to “Go,” rather, Bartimaeus followed Jesus on the way.

Mark is showing us that Bartimaeus is demonstrating true discipleship. Bartimaeus has perceived the inbreaking of God’s Kingdom, understands what Jesus teaches and was willing to leave what he had known behind in order to follow Jesus all the way to the cross. Bartimaeus is not following Jesus blindly, either literally or metaphorically, he does show with his eyes wide open.

Sit with Jesus’s question, “What do you want me to do for you?” Do we have a desire to have our deepest need met? Can we even identify what our deepest need might be? Do we have the willingness of Bartimaeus to change in order to have our deepest need fulfilled? Know that if we have the willingness to walk with Jesus, to truly give ourselves over to Jesus, then Jesus will meet our deepest need. Jesus will give us a new perspective, he will give us a life giving, healing transformation. We’ll know that we’ve been transformed because we will discover that we don’t

feel stuck. We will have moved from a focus on ourselves to a focus that is centered on God.<sup>1</sup> We may even have a dramatic transformation like that of John Newton, the slave trader, whose experience has been forever immortalized in the hymn *Amazing Grace*.

Our congregation has had a history of serving those in need, first at the base, then serving those with mental health needs, and then serving the least of our brothers and sisters. Perhaps our corporate transformation is to take the next logical step and fulfill both parts of the Gospel mandate, to feed the poor and visit the sick and those in prison, AND to share the good news. Perhaps it is a transformation that we can't even imagine. First, though, we have to admit that we are blind. And then, I hope that somewhere in our parish community, we have a Bartimaeus - a persistent voice calling out to Jesus, a voice that says I'm willing to see what you want me to see, teacher. I'm willing! And that this Bartimaeus will help lead us on THE WAY along side of Jesus.

AMEN.

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<sup>1</sup> Wolfgang H. Stahlberg, "Pastoral Perspective," *Feasting on the Gospels:Mark*, (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville KY) 2014, 336.