

Blind Bartimaeus
By Ridgley Joyner
Mark 10:46-52

If you had met me 10 years ago, you would have had no idea that I have terrible eyesight. That is the good thing about contacts, I suppose. Your failure to see like the rest of the world is easily hidden by a tiny sliver of material that masks over your eye correcting the vision so that you can see and move just like anyone else.

When I was young, I was just like any other baby. Well, if you ask my parents I was a bit of a bull in a china shop, but I digress. Around age 2, my parents noticed that my eyes weren't quite tracking like their other two children. I was taken to the eye doctor and they quickly discovered that I needed glasses. Now, I look at kids who have glasses at 2 yo these days and I get jealous, because my options weren't nearly as cute. Back in 1990, discount frames were not a thing yet and my \$600 lenses certainly put a dent in the family bank account. Yet, on the way home 2-year-old Ridgley decided these "toys" were fun, and popping lenses out of my glasses became my favorite pastime...I'm still reminded of the time we lost my lenses, not frames at the Christmas tree farm. After putting my glasses on a cafeteria tray and losing them forever in the trash, my dad decided that this is why I can't have nice things, and I was fitted with none other than brown plastic coke bottle glasses. Having a rambunctious 2-year-old in need of corrective lenses was a saga for my parents I'm sure.

My mother has this vivid memory of when she came to pick me up at the church playground one day. I was sitting on the brick sidewalk very still and focused on the ground beneath me...now you must know that this was completely NOT NORMAL for any toddler, and especially not me. I was FASCINATED by something, MESMERIZED. My teachers looked at my mom and said, she's been staring for a while at the brick and touching it like she has never seen it before. It was then they realized that wearing glasses, had changed everything for me. Suddenly texture on a brick sidewalk was new---my whole world changed when I was given the opportunity to see clearly.

Now, I obviously don't remember this, but many of you may be able to identify with this. Some of you wake up in the morning, and can read, see and go on with your day. Some of us, the world is a bit fuzzy, until our favorite lenses are found that help us see clearly. My vision after about 15 has never gotten worse or better, in fact it leveled out in adolescence, and I am where I am. But I haven't ever known anything different. I will say though, the only time I regret having glasses are when I lose them. I can't see to find the things that help me see—sometimes regardless of our vision, we are blind to things that are right in front of us.

Our scripture reading this morning is the second healing story in the Gospel of Mark. The gospel writer is often known for two things that are important for us today 1) his "sandwiches" of pericopes and 2) his overall theme of "misunderstanding". Today we read the second healing story in a "healing blind men" sandwich. In the first healing story—the bread of the sandwich, we see in Chapter 8 that Jesus heals a blind man but it takes two tries for the miracle to fully happen—then, the meat of the sandwich: next Jesus shares with the disciples about what's ahead for them: he foretells of his betrayal, death and resurrection. The disciples...don't get it—there is

a misunderstanding. Instead, they jump to the important things for them like status—how they can secure their spot at the right and left of Jesus in glory. This, of course is not why Jesus is sharing this with them—he is sharing it because their lives will forever change—what they know the world to be different moving forward, and he is preparing them. And the disciples...never really understand. What follows is the bread—the endpiece of this Markan sandwich, another healing story of Jesus healing Bartimaeus. So here, both healing the blind stories are bookends to a discourse of Jesus providing clarity, but the disciples still aren't seeing clearly.

Jesus gives the prophecy of what's ahead three different times in the chapters leading up to this miracle: once in chapter 8:

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. ³² Jesus said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³ But turning and looking at his disciples, Jesus rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

Then again in Chapter 9:

Jesus was teaching his disciples, saying to them, “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.” But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

Then again in Chapter 10 before our passage this morning—

Jesus said, “See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again.”

So James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to Jesus and said, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” And he said to them, “What is it you want me to do for you?” And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.”

So, Jesus foretells his death, Peter rebukes him—don't scare folks with that talk, Jesus, then again he foretells his death but they're too afraid to ask what it means so they avoid it, and then a third time Jesus shares and they completely miss the point by trying to get their spot in heaven.

Sometimes we are blind to things that are right in front of us because things are easier that way.

While there are two notable healing of blindness stories in the book of Mark, we see that “spiritual blindness” is pervasive—the disciples just don't see what Jesus is trying to show them.

Back to our healing story for today...

Our passage begins with a location. They—Jesus and his disciples and a large crowd are on the road to Jericho...and we are immediately introduced to a new character—Bartimaeus. This blind man is crying out *begging* “JESUS SON OF DAVID HAVE MERCY ON ME”. Yet, the crowd’s efforts to silence him led to him crying louder “SON OF DAVID HAVE MERCY ON ME”

Despite the crowd’s silencing of this blind beggar on the roadside, Jesus stops, and moves toward him—and Jesus invites this crowd to do the same, to call him over. Bartimaeus throws off his cloak and comes before his Lord completely stripped down—Jesus asks him “What do you need?” and Bartimaeus is healed. His sight is regained. This man right in front of him, his Lord grants him the ability to see again, and rather than going forth being “made well” as we see so many do, he follows Jesus with his renewed healing. A story of redemption indeed.

What’s striking though about the story of Blind Bartimaeus is that he is named. Not everyone Jesus comes into contact with is named in the gospel of Mark. In fact, it is the unnamed people who often advance the story—a woman with a disease, a Syrophenician woman, a Gerasene man who suffers from demons. They all are like Bartimaeus but Bartimaeus is different because he is given a name.

Not only is he named, but his name’s meaning is mentioned. We read that this blind man is Bartimaeus (bar the Hebrew prefix meaning son, and Timaeus) Bartimaeus is the son of Timaeus. Which, okay, many people are named in the bible by who they are related to. But this name, Timaeus, should harken us to someone far older than the time of Jesus. Remember, sometimes we are blind to things right in front of us.

Timaeus was the central character in ancient Greek Philosopher Plato’s *Dialogues* written a few centuries before the gospel mark, this essay was extremely popular among the learned classes. And this essay called “Timaeus” was all about seeing, and sight...

Timaeus wanted to understand the world, and he concluded it was the handiwork of a divine craftsman, and this is the key: the craftsman was *good* and wanted the world to be *good and beautiful*. Plato writes about how sight lets us see the stars and sun and heaven... how sight lets us see day and night and mark time by the movement of the sun and moon... and how that awareness has led us to ask about the nature of the universe... PAUSE which has led us to philosophy... and how philosophy is “insight,” the greatest gift ever given by the gods to mortal man.

So Mark has the disciples following him as he goes, more confused than ever and he uses a blind man named after a character known for seeing what is *good and beautiful* to call out after Jesus and follow him.

So here, right in front of us, Mark is making a statement—that the blind man in this narrative, the one being silenced, the one on the margins of society, is actually the one who sees and understands Jesus the most. He calls Jesus Son of David, which is a title that has not been used for Jesus yet but harkens them back to the Jewish belief that the savior would be within the

Davidic royal family. This was a bold claim to say in a place like Jericho with such rich political and royal history. Bartimaeus sees Jesus for who he is and cries out to him defying social norms for healing, and what happens is not simply the miracle of his sight being restored, but his following Jesus. Throwing his cloak down and daring to live a new life as a disciple of this Jesus Christ son of David.

So often we can miss what is right in front of us by pursuing the wrong things like status, a place at the table, things that seem certain at the time—and we miss the point, avoid things that are hard, or even silence others for the sake of comfort and maintaining what we know.

Clarity can be threatening. Facing what we know to be the great good news of the gospel was scary to the disciples because it was unknown territory. Clarity, truly understanding what God has set before us can be threatening and scary because it reframes things forcing us to re-evaluate what is important. And that might mean we have to part with things, comforts that we don't want to part with. That might mean hard truths are uncovered forever changing the course of our lives. That might mean some voices are amplified that make us see our own participation in the silence of others.

Understanding what Christ was foretelling meant that the disciples' lives were going to change and that there was no going back. But the reality was that regardless of whether they silenced Jesus or avoided what he was saying PAUSE it still was going to happen for them and to them. Their job was to trust God in the unknown. There are two types of disciples in this passage: those that "follow Jesus" to the point where it gets uncomfortable, and then the buck stops...or there are those like Bartimaeus that "follow Jesus" risking everything, trusting in Jesus with this new life.

I wonder for you today, What is right there—right in front of you that you may be blind to, in need of clarity from God? What might God be calling you into that you are avoiding out of fear, misunderstanding, discomfort? What truths are you needing to face?

For some of us this past year meant more clarity around issues of social justice—when the pandemic revealed just how many families in our community live paycheck to paycheck.

Or maybe you were made aware of just how differently you saw the world from those you loved and exposing that truth has made it tricky as you navigate being in relationship with them.

Last year we were confronted with hard truths that uncovered blindness we all have for one another as it pertains to socioeconomic or racial differences and are revealing clarity around issues of racism and privilege.

Maybe you are blind to just how many people in your personal life are suffering from loneliness and isolation and need a healing touch from a friend. Maybe you have realized just how lonely you are.

Perhaps you feel like you can see things in a new way now, and you're wishing that never would have happened. That you could return to being in the dark.

Maybe you need God to help you see a way forward in a hard season.

Clarity for what is next for you, your family, your career, or even for a new chapter as a retiree.

I am struck by just how much more “liminal” our time has been since the vaccine has become readily available. We find ourselves busy once more, this time in ways that feels unmanageable and all at once. Suddenly, things take much more of an emotional toll on us. Yet, we still face the uphill battle of managing virtual work, covid cases leading to quarantining, a hybrid of 2019 and 2020 greets us here in 2021.

Much like the disciples, we can't *really* go back to normal. This time of trauma has invited us to re-evaluate what is important to us—our priorities. And we can choose to be like the disciples, avoiding those realities, silencing those who bring it up, or fearing that things may never be the same, or we can be like Bartimaeus and exhibit courageous hope for what's next.

What we can learn from Bartimaeus this week are three things:

1. **Bravery:** Bartimaeus was brave enough to seek out Jesus, to call him by name and to ask him for what he needed. He didn't know what life would look like, but he took a risk and upon being healed took an even bigger risk, to devote his life to following this Jesus who was on the road to a brutal death. So too with us, we are invited to live with this courage—a courage that stands in solidarity with the marginalized even if it isn't the norm, a courage to face what we are avoiding in our lives even if it means a life of the unknown ahead.
2. **Hope:** Bartimaeus had hope for the new life he would have with seeing again—finding clarity, becoming cognizant of things we are blind to around us requires courage, knowing that you can't unsee those things, you can't go back and that it will be hard work, but it is faithful work. When we are invited into a life of renewed faith, things look different, suddenly we may find ourselves convicted to see that the way we lived before isn't what we can go back to—we can't unsee injustice, we can't unsee misaligned priorities, we can't unsee God's grace for us and to us challenging us to keep moving forward faithfully. Bartimaeus knew that it would not be easy, but it would be worth it. So too with us, we must move forward in hope...knowing that God goes with us on the way.
3. **Advocate:** Bartimaeus refused to let the crowds silence him, he continued to cry out to Jesus. In that time, as someone on the margins, his ailment was considered something he did to deserve punishment from God. For someone like him to call out to Jesus in the crowd, to address him was dangerous. The crowds tried to silence him and keep him quiet to maintain the status quo and he took a social risk in order to be face to face with the Lord. So too with us we should work to cry out when we feel like what we have to say needs to be said, even if it causes discomfort, even if it isn't considered “polite” or “proper” Likewise, it is important that we become aware of our blind spots to make sure we ourselves are not like the crowds silencing others because we are uncomfortable.

Friends, may you go from this place, open to what truth lies ahead. And my prayer for us all is that God may reveal what we need to see because Sometimes we can be blind to what's in front of us, and sometimes it is just what god is calling us to see.