



“Seeing Again”

Rev. Dr. Michael L. Gregg

October 28, 2018

Mark 10:46-52

“What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus has asked this question twice. “What do you want me to do for you? What is it that would make life better and what is it that the world owes you?” How we answer Jesus’ question as individuals and as a church will indeed determine what kind of impact we make in this city. Will we answer it like James and John asking for position and power or will we answer it like the blind Bartimaeus who wanted healing? It is my hope that we will take the opportunity to ask Jesus to see again.

Since we have been in the Gospel of Mark for a long time, we know these two stories well, the stories when Jesus asked that one, same question, “What do you want me to do for you?” And we can learn a lot from these two stories: the first, which we heard last week, between Jesus and two of his disciples, James and John and, the second, between Jesus and the blind beggar named Bartimaeus.

When Jesus asked James and John, “What do you want me to do for you?” their response was wishing and arguing and fighting for personal glory. They wanted to sit at Jesus’ left and right hands. They wished to sidle up to Jesus in hope that he would elevate them over and above the other disciples. Their goal in life, what they expected from life, their reason to follow Jesus was to have prestige, power, and personal glory.

Now, I’m not saying that we shouldn’t strive for excellence. I want us to have the best music, have the best preaching, have a fine facility and a fabulous staff. I’m not saying that you shouldn’t strive for that extra degree or that pay raise. We need to strive for excellence! But we mustn’t do it like the disciples. We mustn’t argue our way to the top or push people aside, elbowing others in order to be close to the Messiah. The circle around Jesus is wide and Jesus is always bringing the ones on the margins to the middle and those at the end of the line to the front of the line. Life is not simply about our personal self-advancement especially if that seeking of power, position, and wealth comes at the expense of others. There is a bigger picture, a picture we can’t see if we are blinded on the way.

And that bigger picture is explained in the transformational story of Jesus’ interaction with the blind beggar, Bartimaeus. As a blind man, Bartimaeus would probably have found himself shunned from the community and shoved to the borders of the crowds. As we already know from studying Mark so much recently, that during Jesus’ time, a physical or psychological ailment was often interpreted as a sign that the infirmed or the infirmed person’s parents had done something wrong or had sinned in some way. And because Bartimaeus represented everything sinful and unclean, he was moved to the edge of the way, where he was out of the way of normal people.

And so, Bartimaeus was sitting, begging by the side of the road in the gutter, the place where the outcasts were pushed to the edge and the criminals crucified. He knew his place, his lot in life was to be a vagrant, a blind man, a sinner. In Aramaic, the name Bar-Timaeus, greatly resembles the phrase, Son of Poverty. It also is similar to Son of the Unclean. His ailment, thus his uncleanness, made him poor and alone. His home became a place beside the way, so that he wouldn't be in the way. However, sitting beside the way heightened his other senses. He could hear the flapping of the cloaks and the slapping of the sandals against the cobbled Jericho road. He could smell the musty scent of livestock. He could reach out and feel the fur and matted mud. He could smell the fine foods transported by pious pilgrims making their way for Passover in Jerusalem. He could hear the clinking of the coins falling into his cloak, the same cloak used to keep him warm at night and shield him from the sun during the day – the cloak used for begging to capture those clinking coins. But the sound of generosity was made mute by the scorn from the crowd. “Get out of my way, you beggar, you son of poverty, you son of the unclean!” Bartimaeus didn't want to be put out of the community anymore! He wanted to be called, called to something more. And in order to be called by Jesus to follow on the way, he would have to end his silence. He would have to cry out for the Son of David to hear his pleas and change his name and change his destiny and help him see again.

But the road to transformation and reformation is often long and dangerous. Bartimaeus was a beggar on the Jericho Road. This was the same road in the parable of the Good Samaritan. It was called the “Way of Blood” because bandits robbed, beat, and killed people on this “way.” It would be a way of blood for Jesus as well; a way of blood leading to Jesus sweating blood in the garden and dripping blood on the cross; a way of blood not only changing in altitude but in attitude. Transformation took place on this “Way of Blood.” A blind man, in his lowest of lows, right outside Jericho, the lowest of cities geographically, needed compassion, generosity, assistance. He needed someone to grab his hand and lead him on the way, to ascend from his lowly gutter to the holy mountaintop. He was on the side of the road, beside the way. He was feeling blinded by his sins and belittled for his situation. He wanted to feel called, called to more than his life as a Son of Poverty. He called out and cried out for someone to reach out to him in love and bring him into community, into the crowds, and into the calling as a follower of Jesus.

And that's what Jesus aimed to do, to not only heal him, but in his healing bring the Son of Poverty, the child of loneliness and abandonment back into community. And when we bring those on the margins into loving community we are cured from our own blindness and we see the person for the very first time. If we act like James and John, we are blinded by power and push anyone and everyone out of the way, to the side of the road, in order to be at the top. But if we follow the example of Bartimaeus and cry out for equality, leave everything behind, and demand to follow Jesus rather than gain power, we will reveal that all people are valued in the eyes of God.

And then we are changed. And when we are changed we will see again. We will see that Bartimaeus should be called by the Greek rendering of his name, timeo, meaning “honor.” Unlike the disciples, this Son of Honor offered us an example of true following. Bartimaeus showed us that following ended his blindness and began his healing. Bartimaeus showed us that following was about God doing for us when we couldn't do for ourselves. Bartimaeus showed us that following leads us to places we thought we would never go. When the world is dim, true

following of the servant Christ helps us feel as if our cries for justice are heard and our desire for community is realized.

But true following is difficult. I mean, we continue to see the disciples stumbling through their own spiritual blindness. As we have seen time and time again, throughout Mark's Gospel Jesus's followers, those closest to him, just didn't get it. Moments before encountering Bartimaeus, James and John asked Jesus, like a magician, to do whatever they asked of him. Jesus's response, "What do you want me to do for you?" James and John then asked that when glory comes, one of them should sit on Jesus's left and the other on his right. They wanted prestige, power and position, as they cast a blind eye to Jesus's perpetual pronouncements that the last shall be first and the first shall be last.

And then, moments later, Jesus asked that same piercing question again to blind Bartimaeus as seen in our Gospel lesson for today. "What do you want me to do for you?" The disciples, who were blind, asked for a place of honor while the Son of Honor asked for a place of purpose and of calling and life and community. Bartimaeus wanted to see again, to see his family, a sunset, the morning dew on the cobbled street, the face of Jesus. "What do you want me to do for you?" This phrase showed up for a second time in the text as if Mark wanted to tell the early Christians and us that when our blindness is healed, when we begin to see those crying out on the margins and heal them and bring them into community, that is when we begin to see again, that is when we become like Bartimaeus.

And when we become like the blind beggar, rather than the blind disciples, what we see once our eyes are opened we cannot unsee. Author Nora Gallagher put it this way: "I remember thinking as I worked in the soup kitchen that I didn't want to know what I was learning. Because then my life couldn't go on in the same way as it had before: driving around in my nice red Volvo, thinking about what new linens to buy. What we learn we cannot unlearn," she says. "What we see, we cannot unsee."¹ Yes, I know I've criticized Jesus' disciples for not seeing the truth he was showing them. But, I wonder, if the disciples' not seeing was a way to not face the hurt and heartache in the world. Maybe deep down they knew that once they really saw what Jesus was showing them, they wouldn't be able to unsee it again. If they truly saw what Jesus was showing them about the reality of the world, their lives were going to have to change. Once they could truly see that following Jesus would lead them to suffering, betrayal, and death, and that the kingdom of God was an upside realm where the first were last and the last were first, maybe the disciples intentionally avoided seeing what Jesus was showing them. Maybe deep down they knew that seeing can be dangerous. Maybe they realized that seeing can cause our responses to Jesus' question of "What do you want me to do for you" to be risky.

What do you want me to do for you? I want you to help us shout out and proclaim to the world that being trans is being human and that the government can't dictate our gender identities for us. What do you want me to do for you? I want you to explain to me, Jesus, why people in Yemen are dying of the worst famine in history and we aren't using the world's immense resources to help. What do you want me to do for you? I want you to help us overcome our blindness and see the colors of our skin are a beautiful mosaic of diversity. What do you want me to do for you? I

¹ *The Sacred Meal*, Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 22.

want you to heal our bodies from pain and grief, but if you can't I want you to help us use that pain and grief to comfort those who mourn. What do you want me to do for you? I want you to heal us and open our eyes from our blindness so we can push against the angry and hateful crowds and follow the Jesus of wholeness and inclusivity. What do you want me to do for you?

If Jesus were truly to ask us that question, we must be ready to respond! We must be ready to cry out against injustice when the world tells us to be silent. We must be ready to embrace our poverty when the world says we need to be successful. We need to get up in our weakness when the world shows us that bullies should win. We need to lead from our vulnerability and failures when the world says we have to be perfect. We need to regain our sight by leaving our cloak and coins behind, jumping up, and following Jesus on the way. For if we choose to leave all of who we are, our nets, our boats, our cloaks, our riches, our pride, our power on the dusty road to Jerusalem, then we will be called Children of Honor and we will see again. It is time, church, for us to see again.

Amen.