

Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost October 24, 2021

Mark 10:46-52

I've been thinking about sight these past few weeks.

My mother just had her second cataract surgery and she commented to me on how bright everything looked, on the improved clarity of her vision, and her ability to see everything. Picking out the details that had been missing.

I got curious about what would happen if a person who was blind actually regained their sight. It's fascinating to read how the human mind works to process what our eyes see and make it into something that allows us to interact with the world as it is. But I also discovered that this process of regaining sight is often difficult, takes time, and is almost never perfect.

The story of Bartimaeus from our gospel reading this week is also about sight restored. But it's more than just Bartimaeus who is healed.

As author Debie Thomas points out, Jesus first heals the spiritual blindness of the crowd. These people gathered outside the walls of Jericho were Bartimaeus' friends, neighbors, peers, his culture, and society. Yet they don't really see him. His cries for help are mere annoyances that need to be stopped as quickly as possible. Thomas writes, "His shouts and cries are not worthy of attention. His suffering is not important enough to warrant tenderness, patience, or even curiosity. When the invisible one dares to speak out, the only efficient and reasonable thing to do is to shut him up. The only priority is to restore order, re-establish the social hierarchy, and maintain a status quo that keeps the privileged comfortable." That comfort comes from not really seeing Bartimaeus.

And the next action of Jesus makes that impossible.

Isn't it curious that Jesus tells the crowd to "Call him here."? But in doing so, he forces them to see Bartimaeus and once seen he cannot be unseen. Once acknowledged he cannot be ignored. Once Jesus opens their eyes to his humanity, then they must respond with compassion. Because they see him fully for who he is, beloved by God.

The work of Jesus is similar to that of ophthalmologists removing the cataracts that cloud the vision and obscure objects. And once we see clearly, we must react to what we see.

The crowd doesn't see the need for this change in their vision, but Jesus knows they need it and opens their eyes to see the truth of who Bartimaeus is and what their call is towards him. In that moment, they see and validate Bartimaeus as part of their community, as one to attend to and aid him in getting what he needs. "Take heart, get up, he is calling you."

Bartimaeus though, he knows what asking for sight means. It will mean a drastic change in his life. A chance at having a family of his own and getting a job. It will mean learning again how to navigate the place he has lived in, perhaps all his life. It will mean trying to reintegrate with the community that has kept him on the fringes. Yet, without hesitation, when Jesus asks the question, "What do you want me to do for you" he replies, "My teacher, let me see again."

In this story, the healing power of Jesus rests not only on Bartimaeus, but on the crowd around him. And I wonder if Jesus didn't recognize that for the healing of one to be successful, both needed to happen.

I'm wondering, how are we like the crowd? How are we blind to those people around us who are most in need? Who are those people we look past, don't look in the eye precisely because we don't want to see them? Because seeing them means becoming entangled. It means acknowledging that not everyone in the world is as privileged as we are. It means stepping outside of the ignorance we create so it doesn't bother us.

As I think about this, I also wonder about other things that we are not seeing, other people that we are ignoring.

Jesus was always extending relationship to those who were considered outsiders. Sometimes these were people within society- the homeless, the sick, the poor, women. Sometimes these were the hated "other". Jesus ate with Pharisees and other religious authorities. He extended relationship to those who were considered to be antagonistic to Jesus' own mission. Because they too were created in God's image and needed to hear the good news. He saw them and their need as being worthy of his time and attention

Who are the people, my friends in Christ, who Jesus- our Teacher- is calling us to see?

Yes, we need to open our eyes to the humanity of those who are in poverty, who are in need of restoration into our social fabric. All those who are like Bartimaeus an annoyance that we look over. But we also need to see with truth our neighbors who might have different beliefs than we do. I think what would be most helpful here is if we actually kept the 8th commandment, "You shall not bear false witness" and looked at what others do in the best possible light. If we ascribed to them by default the best of motives until proven otherwise. Because

doing so means we must listen to them and hear the truth of their life. To listen to their thoughts and consider them. It calls us into relationship with them. And this is what Jesus is about- cultivating our relationship with God and with one another.

Lord open our eyes that we might see again!

Will we be brave enough to answer that way when Jesus looks at us and asks, “What do you want me to do for you?” Will we align our desires with his and when our faith opens our eyes to see as Jesus does, will we follow him on the way? Actually exercise that gift when given and do as Jesus has done?

It is not an easy question to answer. I confess that for myself, I am inconsistent in how I live out this calling. And I am disappointed in myself even as I do it. It reminds me of Paul’s words, “For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do” (Romans 7:19).

The grace of God is present in this way, that Jesus does not rebuke the crowd for their treatment of Bartimaeus. Rather, Jesus just does what needs to be done. Without fanfare or any sense of condemnation. He merely calls their attention to Bartimaeus and lets the Spirit do the rest of the work.

Thanks be to God, Jesus sees with the eyes of God and knows where we are blind and will give us sight even if we don’t think we need it. Drop the scales from our eyes so that we might see clearly.

The grace of God is present in this way, that even in a crowd of people Jesus sees, Jesus hears Bartimaeus, the one in need. We can always be sure that God hears our cries and responds. We know this about God from God’s meeting with Moses

“I have seen the misery of my people...I have heard their cry...I know their sufferings.” (Exodus 3:7).

Thanks be to God Jesus comes to us as well. When we are the ones by the roadside, ignored by those around us, crying for God to have mercy. That work of Jesus might happen through others, even as Jesus used the crowd to call Bartimaeus to come to him, but it will come.

The grace of God is present in this way, that when we see, truly see our neighbors, life is better. Brighter, clearer, more vivid. For everywhere we look we will find a story of someone’s life brought to mind by the house they live in. By the place they work. Or even embodied in themselves.

One of the sad privileges of my calling is to sit with families when their loved one dies and to hear their story. Each is unique and varied. Some are fascinating in their variety and the adventures they had. Others are simple stories of routine and well known community. Yet, each of these adds to the richness of the tapestry of life. Each was filled with hundreds or thousands of people whose lives they touched. Each was essential to someone. And to see those stories, to hear them and bear witness to them, to know they are embodied in each of us in assembly. To imagine the broad tapestry they weave in this world. What a privilege and gift that is.

Thanks be to God Jesus sees us in that way. That he knows our stories and whether adventure filled or routine, loves us. Loves us enough to die on a cross so that we might no longer be blind. Loves us enough to help us see again.

Thanks be to God.