

The 22nd Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 25)
October 24, 2021
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Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Jeremiah 31:7-9
Psalm 126
Hebrews 7:23-28
Mark 10:46-52

Church building closed due to COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic: the church is open at www.trinitybend.org.

There's more going on in this morning's gospel than we readily see. (That's how I see it.)

This story is about more than Jesus and a blind beggar named Bartimaeus. It's also a story about every person who suffers from blindness of one sort or another. Which means this is a story about Jesus's disciples. And this is a story about the townspeople from Jericho. And this is a story about you and me, too.

We're at the end of an important section in Mark's gospel. For quite some time by now, Jesus has been moving steadily toward Jerusalem – and telling his disciples about what awaits him there. This encounter with Bartimaeus is the last thing Jesus does before Palm Sunday.

And at the beginning of this section in Mark's gospel, and that focus on that journey toward Jerusalem, Jesus encountered another blind person. Jesus restored *his* sight, as well, of course. But it was a curious healing. At first, Jesus only succeeded in getting the man to see partially. After that first try, the man said, "I can see people, but they look like trees, walking." Jesus had to try again before the man could see everything clearly. ⁱ

Those two restorations of sight are the bookends of this section in Mark's gospel: Bartimaeus at the end and this partial restoration of sight to another blind person at the start.

That first healing is the perfect introduction for all that follows. Jesus has such a hard time getting others – especially his own disciples – to see clearly. They settle for partial insight into who Jesus is. And so they stumble blindly along the way he would lead them. But Jesus keeps trying – again and again – to help them see more clearly, more deeply.

Just after that first healing, Jesus asks the disciples to tell him who people think he is. Then he asks them, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter, you'll recall, declares Jesus the Messiah. But when Jesus goes on to talk about suffering and rejection and death, Peter refuses to see it. ⁱⁱ

A bit later, Jesus takes Peter, along with James and John, up a high mountain. And they see Jesus transfigured up there, talking with Elijah and Moses. Peter wants to set up camp there, so he can see Jesus like that *all the dang time*. But Jesus leads them back down the mountain and tells them, again, about his coming death and resurrection. ⁱⁱⁱ

Those are but two of the moments when they fail to see Jesus for who he is – though Jesus keeps on trying to get them to see him. And because the disciples cannot see Jesus clearly for who he is, they fail to see themselves as Jesus would have them be seen.

They argue amongst themselves about who's the greatest. Jesus chastises them, saying, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." He takes a child and puts the child in the center of their circle and says to welcome a child is how they welcome God. Jesus tells them to be particularly careful to care for those he called "little ones."^{iv}

Even so, when people try to bring little children to Jesus, the disciples try to keep them at bay – to protect Jesus from being bothered by them. They still couldn't see that Jesus didn't think children a nuisance. Jesus esteemed them highly. Jesus tries to get them to see that it's the wide-eyed wonder of little children that can imagine a better world than somber adults settle for.^v

Last Sunday, we heard of another moment when Jesus' disciples showed just how blind they could be. James and John ask Jesus to do something for them. "What do you want me to do for you?" he asks, and they ask for seats of honor, for extra favors. They still see Jesus as heading toward power and glory and victory, and they want in on that.^{vi}

And that brings us to this morning's gospel. Bartimaeus isn't the only one who's blind. It's pretty clear nobody wanted to see or hear from the blind beggar named Bartimaeus. When he begins to shout out, the townspeople tell him to be quiet. They sound like the disciples' when they tried to keep children at bay. The people thought him a nuisance, not the sort who should bother someone like Jesus.

Jesus alone sees this blind beggar beside the road as more than a nuisance. The rest of them are blind, but Jesus sees a child of God. (And we remember what Jesus thought of God's children.)

And so Jesus tries again; he invites everyone else to see Bartimaeus as he does. He tells them to call him over. And they do. Having just told Bartimaeus not to bother Jesus, Jesus gets them to tell Bartimaeus that he is no bother, that he's wanted. (It's a clever way to invite them to see him differently.)

And if they can see Bartimaeus now, he'll show them an unrestrained response. He jumps up, leaving his cloak behind. His only possession. His livelihood. The cloak spread out to receive the tossed coins was the beggar's tool of trade. He's the counterpoint to the rich man who, when told to sell his possessions and follow Jesus, couldn't do it. He walked off, grieving. Bartimaeus springs up, rejoicing. He's like one of the early disciples who left their fishing nets and their boats to rise up and follow Jesus.

And Jesus asks him, "What do you want me to do for you?" It's precisely the same question Jesus had just asked James and John. They wanted seats of honor, positions of privilege and prestige. But Bartimaeus asks only to see.

And once he does see, once he sees Jesus clearly, Bartimaeus follows Jesus. With eyes wide open, Bartimaeus follows Jesus not for glory. Bartimaeus follows Jesus from the gates of Jericho on the way that leads next to Jerusalem and the cross. It's what we celebrate as Palm Sunday and Holy Week.

And still Jesus puts before us the penetrating question: "What do you want me to do for you?"

Truth be told, I suspect we still struggle to answer as faithfully and as fully as Bartimaeus does. We are content to see Jesus only partially. And because we do not see Jesus clearly, we fail to see the world and our neighbors (and even ourselves) as Jesus sees, and so we fail to love as Jesus loves.

As far as I'm concerned, that's what is going on in our country's persistent divided response to COVID. So many people seem to care more about protecting their individual rights rather than shoulder our shared obligations to care for one another, remembering especially the "little ones" who most need that care and protection.

And what disturbs me most of all are those who blindly insist that their religious faith supports their response. They object to an infringement of their religious freedoms. They seek a religious exemption to a life-saving vaccine. Even as the Pope has called on the faithful to get vaccinated, some cite their Roman Catholic faith as their reason for not getting vaccinated.

In an opinion piece I came across this past week, Tim Diebel laments the blindness. He cites the clear thread of Judeo-Christian tradition: the persistent disinterest in personal privilege, reliably favoring care for others, especially the most vulnerable. "Object to COVID precautions if you must," he writes, "but don't ask religion to be complicit in that decision." And he sums up his disappointment in these words:

I am not surprised that people of religious fervor question or resist governmental or employer mandates, believing that we owe our allegiance to a higher authority. I am surprised only that we weren't among the first to mask up, that when mask mandates were issued we didn't collectively respond, "You don't need to tell us. We are already wearing them, loving our neighbors as ourselves." ^{vii}

I should take care even here – especially here. It's all-but-irresistibly tempting to congratulate myself for seeing so much more clearly than others. But if there's anything more for us to glean from this morning's gospel, I think it must surely be about how blindness is not just an affliction of some; it afflicts us all.

Until that day when we see everyone as Jesus sees them, and love everyone as Jesus loves them, we still remain blind. And we will still stumble along the way Jesus calls us to walk. And so long as that is an uncomfortable truth for you and for me, we would do well to keep before us the stunning example of Bartimaeus: "My teacher, let me see again."

I mentioned that Palm Sunday follows right after where we leave off this morning. So I guess if I'm juggling our liturgical seasons this morning, I can leave with an Advent prayer. It's from the Iona Community of Scotland. I've shared it with you in a prior year in Advent, but it seems to fit this moment in this season well:

Open our eyes, Lord,
especially if they are half shut because we are tired of looking,
or half open because we fear we see too much,
or bleared with tears because yesterday and today and tomorrow
are filled with the same pain,
or contracted, because we only look at what we want to see.

Open our eyes, Lord,
to gently scan the life we lead,
the home we have,
the world we inhabit,
and so to find,
among the gremlins and the greyness,
signs of hope we can fasten on and encourage.

Give us, whose eyes are dimmed by familiarity,
a bigger vision of what you can do
even with hopeless cases and lost causes
and people of limited ability.

Show us the world as in your sight,
riddled by debt, deceit and disbelief
yet also
shot through with possibility
for recovery, renewal, redemption,

And lest we fail to distinguish vision from fantasy,
today, tomorrow, this week,
open our eyes to one person or one place,
where we - being even for a moment prophetic -
might identify and wean a potential in the waiting.

And with all this,
open our eyes, in yearning, for Jesus.

On the mountains,
in the cities,
through the corridors of power
and streets of despair
to help, to heal,
to confront, to convert,
O come, O come, Immanuel. ^{viii}

ⁱ Mark 8:22-26.

ⁱⁱ Mark 8:27-33.

ⁱⁱⁱ Mark 9:2-13, 30-32.

^{iv} Mark 9:33-42.

^v Mark 10:13-16.

^{vi} Mark 10:(32-34) 35-45.

^{vii} Tim Diebel @ <https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/opinion/columnists/iowa-view/2021/09/29/christians-love-one-another-covid-19-mask-mandate-coronavirus-vaccine/5918763001/>.

^{viii} From *Cloth for the Cradle* (Iona Community Wild Good Worship Group), pp. 35-36.