
SEEING CLEARLY

MARK 10:46-52

A SERMON PREACHED IN DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL
ON SUNDAY, OCTOBER 24, 2021
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Prayer: Lord God, we long to see you more clearly, love you more dearly, and follow you more nearly. Use this time according to your will. Amen.

The “Privilege Walk” is a group exercise that has become common in recent years. In this exercise a group of people such as a class or team stand shoulder to shoulder as they wait for the facilitator’s questions. Questions are along the lines of “If one of your parents attended college, take one step forward.” “If your parents did not grow up in the US, take one step back.” “If you own a car, take one step forward.”¹ After going through a series of 20 or so questions, the participants are typically no longer in a line and instead find themselves quite at a distance from one another. The results can be surprising. The purpose is to raise awareness of differing social locations.

As an example, if I were asked, “Have you had shelter and food security?” Yes - step forward. How about high school, undergraduate, and graduate education. Check. Life threatening illness? Yes, take a step back on that one. Um -- let’s see. Even in a small town in Michigan I had access to surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation, wonderful medical professionals, and sufficient insurance to cover the cost. Yes, one step back, but I am going to count that also as two or three steps forward. (By the way, that illness was 18 years ago; 18 years of borrowed time and still counting! Isn’t it all borrowed time, lent to us by God?)

Let’s think now about Bartimaeus, the character in today’s gospel reading. Economically secure? Apparently, not. He is beggar on the side of the road. A network of family support? No evidence of that here. A physical condition that hinders his well-being? Blindness in 1st century Palestine, no social safety net of any kind, no seeing eye dog or audiobooks. Yes, definitely take a step back. Social support from the wider community? Definitely not. Multiple people tell him to be quiet. They don’t want to hear from him.

So it seems that Bartimaeus is on the sidelines in almost every way we can imagine.² We meet him in this text as he is sitting on the side of the road when Jesus passes by. The next thing we know, Bartimaeus is calling out “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” When the crowd tells him to hush, he shouts out even louder, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Remarkably, wondrously, Jesus does just that. Jesus tells those near him to call him over. When Bartimaeus hears the invitation to come, while still blind, he quickly gets up, throws off his cloak and finds his way to Jesus. Jesus asks what he wants and Bartimaeus replies, “Let me see again.” Jesus declares “Your faith has made you well” and his sight is restored. Bartimaeus then followed Jesus on the way. He is no longer on the sidelines. He is now with Jesus. It is a beautiful story and a wonderful miracle.

I wonder how someone who uses a wheelchair for mobility would hear this story. Or how about someone who has macular degeneration, whose vision of the world slowly dims. No doubt there are many people who pray day after day for a miraculous healing, yet have not had the blessing Bartimaeus received. They hear Jesus say “Your faith has made you well” and wonder if somehow it is their own fault that the miracle does not come. A colleague recently led a discussion on the ways the Bible has been used to hurt others. To use this text to increase the suffering of one whose prayers have gone unanswered, is hurtful and wrong. I am not going to try to address theodicy, the thorny problem of evil, but I do think there is more around this passage that may help.

¹ Penn State Student Affairs: <https://studentaffairs.psu.edu/learningmodules/powerworkshop/privilegewalk.shtml>

² Luis Menéndez-Antuña, Commentary on Mark 10:46-52, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-30-2/commentary-on-mark-1046-52-5>

The problem with our pattern of reading only a paragraph of scripture at a time is that we miss the context. If you watched only 15 minutes of a movie or read only page 147 of a 300 page novel, it is likely in both cases you would miss a lot. This passage in Mark is the only time Bartimaeus is mentioned in the Bible. For this reason, it is easy to end the story here. The blind beggar on the side of the road is healed by Jesus and joins him on the way. There is such joy in this moment that I naturally want to add “and he lived happily ever after.” His blindness is gone, he can find some work, be restored to the community, live a long and happy life, then die peacefully as an old man. Maybe that is what happens. Maybe not. We don’t know.

Let’s back up a bit for a moment.

This story of Bartimaeus is the bookend of a section that started in chapter 8.³ In chapter 8, Jesus heals another blind man while he was in Bethsaida. (Mark 8:22-26) In that case, a man was brought to Jesus who proceeded to put saliva on his eyes and lay hands on him. The result was that the man could see, but not well. He said “I can see people, but they look like trees, walking.” (Mark 8:24) So, Jesus laid his hands on him a second time, then the man was able to see clearly. Is Jesus just getting better at healing blind people? Maybe a little of practice makes perfect?

It reminds me of how much cataract surgery has changed over the years. When my grandfather had cataract surgery many, many years ago, it involved an overnight hospitalization and strict instructions to remain flat in bed. When my mother had the surgery it was an outpatient surgery. In the office where it was done, there was a closed circuit television which allowed family members to watch. Even though we couldn’t see much, I found it fascinating. It still makes me smile that when the surgery was barely done, my mother sat straight up ready to go. Firm hands quickly laid her back down so that they could finish wherever dressing and drops needed to be done. My brother remembers his cataract surgery two years ago as taking such a short time that he was home again before he knew it. The advancements in this surgery are remarkable and the vast majority of patients see clearly again.

Like cataract surgery, did Jesus just improve his technique?

Let’s keep looking at the context. Earlier, Jesus has been teaching and preaching in Galilee and his disciples are trying to follow, but sometimes they are confused. They don’t yet have a clear picture of who he is. Jesus speaks in parables, and not everyone understands the point of the stories. Now Jesus is beginning to make the transition from his ministry in Galilee to his passion in Jerusalem.⁴ Moving forward, after this healing of the man from Bethsaida, three times, Jesus tells his disciples about his upcoming death and resurrection. (Mark 8:31, 9:31, 10:33-34) If the parables were confusing, imagine hearing about suffering, death, and resurrection.⁵ That is not what the disciples expected or wanted from a rabbi let alone their Messiah. One time, Peter even argued with Jesus about this. You can guess who lost the argument. (Mark 8:32-33) Another time, we learn the disciples did not understand what Jesus was saying, but were too scared to ask for clarification. (Mark 9:32).

In the gospel of Mark, this section between the two healing stories of blind men, in addition to the predictions of Jesus’s death, has three stories of interesting requests. We have heard these conversations the last two Sundays. Two weeks ago, Assistant Dean Puckett preached on the passage (Mark 10:17-31) which is often referenced as the “Rich Young Ruler” because the Matthew version of the story speaks of the man as young. (Matt 19:20) The question the rich man asks Jesus is “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Last week, Dean Powery addressed the request of James and John. (Mark 10: 35-45) These two disciples came to Jesus saying, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” It is not a bad thing to want eternal life or to be close to Jesus forever, and yet Jesus does not grant either of these requests. Instead, to the rich man Jesus says “Give up

³ Eugene Boring, *Mark: A Commentary*, p. 231

⁴ Sarah Hinlicky Wilson, Commentary on Mark 10:46-52, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-30-2/commentary-on-mark-1046-52-4>

⁵ David Schnasa Jacobsen, *Mark*, p 135

everything;” a notion that the seeker finds impossible. To James and John, Jesus asks, “Do you really think you can drink the cup I will drink?” then says that he cannot grant their request.

Now the third request comes from Bartimaeus. What does he seek? Not the assurance of an eternal reward. Not a position of honor in the heavenly realm. No, calling out from the sidelines, he simply begs, “Have mercy on me!” This request Jesus heeds. He stops in his tracks, calls over the blind man, and asks “What do you want me to do for you?” (Mark 10:51) Bartimaeus asks to see again and the text says, “Immediately, he regained his sight and followed him on the way.” (Mark 10:52)

He asks to see, yet in many ways Bartimaeus already sees better than the others.⁶ Even before he has his physical sight, he has spiritual insight that surpasses that of the disciples. He sees who Jesus is -- the Son of David, the one who can offer mercy. He sees the opportunity he is given when Jesus invites him to come. Unlike the rich man who cannot wean himself away from his possessions, Bartimaeus throws off his cloak, perhaps one of his few garments⁷, and joins Jesus. Bartimaeus recognizes what he most needs, not eternal life or a position of honor, but mercy. First and foremost, he needs mercy. Upon receiving that divine mercy, Bartimaeus follows Jesus.

What Bartimaeus does not know, but we as the readers of the gospel do know, is where Jesus is headed. Bartimaeus willingly follows Jesus, who is heading to Jerusalem, to the cross and resurrection. Does Bartimaeus have a “happily ever after” life? We don’t know, but he does follow Jesus who is going to pour his love out for all people. We also know that Bartimaeus is no longer on the sidelines, Jesus has mercifully called him into discipleship, and he willingly follows. Together, they are heading a cross, then an empty tomb.

This all starts with the right request: “Have mercy on me!” This prayer has been central to Christians for centuries. Sometimes it is called the “Jesus prayer” and phrased “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.” Sometimes it is simply “Have mercy.” Saints and sinners through the ages keep returning to this prayer over and over to seek grace in a time of need, to remind us what is central, to clarify our vision on who Jesus is. This prayer also reminds us that we are always beginners in the spiritual life. The desert monks of the 3rd century, who devoted their lives to spiritual growth, valued a “beginners heart” in which they made a fresh start every day.⁸ The moment we think we are mature in the faith and have it all figured out, the further we are from the truth.⁹ For this reason, we need to come back, time and time again to the beginning: our need for mercy. From this spot, we find humility before God and gratitude for all God has done.

Where does this leave us? Well, for those of us who are in the midst of mid-semester stress, wondering how hard we have to push to get to the finish line, for those of us who are so weary of COVID, for those of us who are distracted by material abundance, privilege, or ambition, perhaps our best and only prayer is “Lord, have mercy.” Yes, we say this at the time of confession, but it is so much broader. The good news is that even as this prayer leaves our lips it is granted. Jesus does offer us mercy. Again. And once again, we find ourselves filled with both humility and gratitude. In this spot we find that we have not abandoned the love we had at first (Rev 2:4) and instead we find we are filled with joy and peace in believing, abounding with hope, and strengthened by the Spirit. (Rom 15:13) From this spot, we are ready to follow Jesus again, not because it will provide a magical “happily ever after” ending, but rather out of gratitude and love for the merciful One.

Bartimaeus sees clearly again. So can we.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁶ Mark G. Vitalis Hoffman, Commentary on Mark 10:46-52, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-30-2/commentary-on-mark-1046-52-3>

⁷ Kim Huat Tan, *Mark*, p. 148

⁸ *Desert Fathers and Mothers: Early Christian Wisdom Sayings*, Annotated by Christian Valters Paintner, p. 154

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 164