

## A Question of Vision

A sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt  
At Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA  
On October 28<sup>th</sup>, 2018

*Mark 10:46-52*

Today we continue our focus on lectionary readings from the Gospel of Mark and the questions that those passages raise by turning to today's text from Chapter 10. It's a story of a man who has his vision restored and it is the conclusion of a section of Mark that begins back in the 8<sup>th</sup> chapter with the healing of another blind man, who has his sight restored by Jesus, but in stages. All of the passages in between that first healing and the one we'll hear about today, a number of which I've tackled in the last several weeks, have to do with people—Simon Peter, the disciples as a group, the rich young ruler, James and John, the crowd—not seeing the point Jesus was trying to get them to see. Today we have more of the same. The man who is physically blind has his sight restored. It's an open question as to whether the crowd really comes to see, however.

*They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!' Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, 'Son of David, have mercy on me!' Jesus stood still and said, 'Call him here.' And they called the blind man, saying to him, 'Take heart; get up, he is calling you.' So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. Then Jesus said to him, 'What do you want me to do for you?' The blind man said to him, 'My teacher, let me see again.' Jesus said to him, 'Go; your faith has made you well.' Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.*

I wonder what it must have been like to be Bartimaeus:-the one who used to be able to see, but could no longer; -the one who had been reduced to begging, pushed to the margins in a culture that didn't have room for a person without physical sight to make a living any other way than by asking for alms; -the one who sat by the roadside and hoped for a handout; -the one whose voice the crowd tried to shush.

I think today's text from the Gospel of Mark **wants us** to imagine what it was like to be Bartimaeus, and one reason I believe that is because Bartimaeus is the **first and only** person Jesus heals in Mark's gospel to be given a name. Everyone else in Mark that Jesus heals is identified by their disease or their impairment, their ethnicity or their relationship to someone else. But Bartimaeus? Bartimaeus is given a name.

It's not that those other people don't **have** names. The leper, Simon Peter's mother in law, the paralytic, the Syrophenician woman's child, the man with the withered hand, the Gerasene demoniac in the graveyard, the deaf and mute man, Jairus' daughter, the woman with the continuous flow of blood, the boy with seizures. They all **have** names. It's just that Mark **doesn't mention** their names.

But Mark **mentions** Bartimaeus. Mark assigns this man a name. The name means son of Timaeus, Bartimaeus which comes from a Greek word, *timayo*, which means honored or precious. It's as if Mark is trying to drive home the point that Bartimaeus, blind Bartimaeus, the one who sat on the street corner, the one the crowds tried to silence, is somebody's precious child. Bartimaeus has a name, and a family, and a story. He is a fully human being. Bartimaeus deserves to be noticed, and treated with dignity and respect.

However, that's not how the crowds treat him in today's passage—at least not until Jesus intervenes.

When Jesus steps in, what is fragmented becomes whole, what goes unseen becomes seen, and people who have been touched by him see another way of being human in the world—they see the way of wholeness, integration, and connection.

But before Jesus steps in and has his way with the crowd lining the street on the way out of Jericho, they regard Bartimaeus as nothing more than an annoyance, someone they didn't want to look at, someone whose voice they try to silence, because frankly, they didn't want to hear it. I suspect those Jericho crowds had grown practiced at not seeing Bartimaeus, at looking past him and his story even as they threw a few coins his way every once in a while.

Of course, every so often he piped up so loudly and insistently that they had to try to shut him up. Such was the case when Jesus passed through Jericho, and Bartimaeus, hearing about it, yelled out for mercy - the precious son of Timaeus calling out to the precious son of David for compassion and grace.

Now I want you to notice what Jesus does when Bartimaeus calls out to him. Unlike in other instances of healing, Jesus doesn't speak directly to him. Not at first. Instead he stands perfectly still and speaks to the crowds, the people of Jericho who had spent years trying to ignore this blind man.

He gives them an order. Jesus redirects their focus and says, "Call him here." Which is exactly what they do. Then all of the sudden, the crowd's approach to Bartimaeus shifts in such a way that now they are telling him to *take heart* and *get up* because Jesus is calling. So Bartimaeus comes to Jesus, and as with James and John last week, Jesus asks him "What do you want me to do for you?"

Unlike James and John last week who answered that question by saying, "Oh, give us positions of preferment, let us have an express pass to glory, let us sit on your right and your left," the blind man simply says, "Let me see again."

All Bartimaeus, the honored son, asks for is **mercy**, not privilege. All he wants to do is to be able to see once more. And that's what Jesus grants him. To ask for mercy is to long for connection, to humble yourself enough to admit that you need help. In this case, Mark's gospel says the man who asks for mercy has his physical sight restored.

That being said, I have become convinced that this story is less about one man's physical, literal sight being given back to him, and more about how crowds can come to see again, to regain, or gain for the first time, a spiritual vision—a way of looking at the world that looks for and sees wholeness.

This too is related to mercy, to human connection. Which makes me think of one of my favorite quotes from Anne Lamott's book *Hallelujah Anyway*, a series of brief essays on mercy. She puts it this way, "Love and mercy are sovereign, if often disguised as ordinary people, and as inescapable as sturdy pediatric nurses. Over and over, in spite of our awfulness and having squandered our funds, the ticket-taker at the venue waves us through. Forgiven and included, when we experience this, **that we are in this with one another**, flailing and starting over in the awful beauty of being humans together, we are saved."<sup>i</sup> We are saved.

The people in the crowd, *they* were the ones who couldn't see, because they were unable to grasp—*until Jesus redirected their focus*—that not only were they in this with one another, they were in it with Bartimaeus, too. He was part of them, and all of them were us.

On Friday at the National Cathedral, the ashes of Matthew Shepard, the young gay man who was brutally murdered on a chilly night in Wyoming 20 years ago, were finally laid to rest. Matthew had a name, and a story. He didn't have vision problems, as far as I know, nor was he in any way less than a whole and beautiful human being, a precious child of his parents and of God. But the men who murdered him killed him simply because of his sexual orientation. The fact that he had a name and a family and a story was not important to those two men. What was important was the hatred that they'd nurtured for those of a different sexual orientation than theirs.

For the past twenty years, Matthew's parents have not interred his ashes nearer to their community, because they were afraid, not without reason, that his grave would be desecrated. How heartening it was to hear his father, Dennis, say at the Cathedral, "Matthew loved the church. He loved the fact that it was a safe space for anyone to enter. It is important that we now have a home for Matt. A home that is safe from haters. A home that he loved dearly."<sup>ii</sup>

Less than twenty four hours later, yesterday morning, after that wonderful celebration at the Cathedral and those words about how a place of worship can and should be a safe space for anyone to enter, a gunman went into a synagogue in Pittsburgh and killed eleven of our Jewish brothers and sisters, our siblings in the Abrahamic tradition.

The man who came into that sanctuary with his guns blazing, looking to kill Jews, may have been able to literally see, but over the years he had lost any capacity he may ever have had to see with the eyes of his heart—to see spiritually. Because each and every one of the people he killed had a name. Each and every one of them was a precious child of God and their parents. And yes, they were also Jewish.

I want you to know that I reached out to Rabbi Amy Schwartzman at Temple Rodef Shalom yesterday with an email. I wrote: *I wanted to reach out to you in the aftermath of what happened in Pittsburgh earlier today to let you know that your siblings at Immanuel Presbyterian stand ready to do whatever we can to show solidarity with the Jewish community. Let me know if there is anything we can do to be of assistance—or any way we can show our solidarity with you in a more visible way. So grateful for what you and TRS do in the community and the world, Aaron.*

She responded to that email less than an hour later by thanking me and letting us here at Immanuel know that they will be hosting a service of community solidarity and support and comfort on Tuesday at 7:30 at TRS. They are trying to pull a flyer together that can be shared.

In the interest of spiritual sight, I hope you'll come to that—and to the event here next Sunday where we hear from Bryan Stevenson about the work of his Equal Justice Initiative.

When we forget that we are in this with one another, **all of us**, when we lose the capacity for empathy and the ability to imagine what it would be like to be in someone else's skin or to face someone else's plight, when we forget that everyone, everyone, including and perhaps especially those whose **cries for mercy we try to shush**, we are the ones who cannot see.

We become, as Fred Buechner says, *not actors in the drama of our own lives but reactors*. Always reacting, reacting, reacting, rather than responding. *The fragmentary nature of our experience*

*shatters us into fragments. Instead of being whole, most of the time we are in pieces, and we see the world in pieces, full of darkness at one moment and full of light the next.* <sup>iii</sup>

There is so much fragmentation in our world today, so much brokenness, so much division, so much dehumanization. I wish I didn't have to talk about it almost every Sunday. There's just so much of it.

I think the preeminent spiritual task of our age is to begin to really see, to see wholeness. To see in our friend and our foe, our neighbor and our enemy, the person who votes with us, or doesn't vote with us, to see in each and every person, the face of God.

So it is good to remember, also, what it means to see with the eyes of our heart. Fred Buechner is right:

*"It is in Jesus, of course, and in the people whose lives have been deeply touched by Jesus, and in ourselves at those moments when we also are deeply touched by him, that we see another way of being human in this world, which is the way of wholeness. When we glimpse that wholeness in others, we recognize it immediately for what it is, and the reason we recognize it, is that no matter how much the world shatters us to pieces, we carry inside us a vision of wholeness that we sense is our true home and that beckons to us. That's part of what the book of Genesis means by saying that we are made in the image of God."*<sup>iv</sup>

I find myself with stunning regularity these days doing two things. One is sighing. As Brian reminds me about a sermon I preached long ago, every time I sigh, I should be thinking, "Be open!" One thing I do is to sigh. The other is to say, "Lord, have mercy."

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<sup>i</sup> Anne Lamott, *Hallelujah Anyway: Rediscovering Mercy* (New York: Riverhead, 2017), pp.137-138

<sup>ii</sup> Tom Gjelten and Amita Kelly, "You Are Safe Now: Matthew Shepard Laid to Rest at National Cathedral" *All Things Considered*, National Public Radio, October 26<sup>th</sup>, 2018. <https://www.npr.org/2018/10/26/659835903/watch-matthew-shepard-laid-to-rest-at-national-cathedral>

<sup>iii</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Telling Secrets* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1991)

<sup>iv</sup> *ibid*