

Mark 10:46-52 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

The Healing of Blind Bartimaeus

⁴⁶They 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. ⁴⁷When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" ⁴⁸Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" ⁴⁹Jesus stood still and said, "Call him here." And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart; get up, he is calling you." ⁵⁰So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. ⁵¹Then Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" The blind man said to him, "My teacher,^[a] let me see again." ⁵²Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

October 28, 2019

“Seeing and Being Seen”

Mark 10:46-52

Kerra Becker English

I’m old enough to remember when video killed the radio star. Technology changes, and what we used to only hear, we can now see, and now what we can see can be broadcast around the world on YouTube at the speed of your internet connection. The radio hit became the MTV video and now everyone – well I suspect a good portion of you here - have the technology in your purse or pocket to record a video of your cat to post to social media or video-call your grandchildren across town or across the country to read them a bedtime story. It’s the technology that was imagined by the Jetsons and then some. You and I have the power to be seen, not just face to face here in this sanctuary – but just about anywhere receivable from a cell phone tower.

Our power to be seen has changed exponentially since 1979 when The Buggles released their homage to the time of radio and wondered in verse about how this video boom was going to change the way we see one another. And now, now there are a handful of people making a living doing what in my childhood would have been called home movies. The rise of the YouTube star seems to be far surpassing anything of what the video star of just a couple decades ago could have anticipated.

I find it fascinating. My daughter can hold up her phone and make videos of herself completely unconsciously, and I have trouble calling old friends on Facetime without feeling weird about it. In an age of video everything, when we do find ourselves face to face, how do we see others? And maybe just as importantly, how do we risk being seen?

This passage from Mark tells us that Bartimaeus is a blind beggar who wants to be seen by Jesus. There's a lot going on in these few sentences of scripture. A blind man wants to be seen, and we find out later in the story that he also wants to be ABLE to see – again. He wasn't always blind. He knows what it's like to see, and maybe after he experienced losing his sight, he also knows what it feels like to be unseen, unnoticed and ignored.

The details of this story remind me that the vulnerability that goes with wanting to be seen, and being terrified of what others might see in us hasn't changed all that much in spite of our increasing comfort with video technology. The blind beggar hears that this large crowd passing by includes Jesus, and he wants to catch this popular healer's attention. It's understandable. He is hoping for help and has a condition that otherwise might render him invisible at his roadside spot. Except in this story he isn't quite like the person with the cardboard sign standing in the median of the road that we are hoping won't catch our eye at the traffic light. He is named, his family is named, his town is named. People know or at least think they know who Bartimaeus is. Therefore, they are adamant that he stop drawing attention to himself. He keeps shouting, "Have mercy," but many sternly ordered him to shut up.

"Son of David, have mercy on me," he shouts, which actually catches Jesus' attention. There are a number of these kind of stories in scripture where Jesus gets interrupted and he makes the interruption his focus rather than continuing on as his disciples, and the crowds, and the other people almost always want him to do. He stops. He pays attention. He too learns the blind man's name. Even more so, he asks Bartimaeus directly, "What do you want me to do for you?" I wish I could be that patient, that confident, that caring in the interruptions I sometimes have in my own day as a pastor. It's too easy to assume, to assume what someone needs from the food pantry, to assume that the unfamiliar voice on the other end of the phone wants financial

assistance, and then to avoid the long conversation that can ensue when someone needs to actually tell you a real answer when you ask them the question, “How’s it going?” Or “What do you want me to do for you?”

I’m embarrassed when I think about the opportunities I miss by not seeing, by being part of the crowd that wants Jesus to just keep on going. I want to keep the camera focused on Jesus, the star of the show, and he’s more willing to turn it toward that person on the margins. There’s a lot of not seeing that happens in our world, and that not seeing has been going on for a very long time. We choose not to see the roadside beggars. We choose not to see the schools that are failing our children both in the inner cities and the rural outskirts. We choose not to see the brown children being detained as they crossing our southern border. We choose not to see the wounds, the blindness, the brokenness of human lives that are calling out for mercy. “Son of David, have mercy on me.”

Over the past two days at the Ash Grove Women’s retreat, we talked about trauma – both individual trauma and the kind of trauma that happens to whole groups of people. On more than one occasion, when doctors conducting scientific research began to point to abuse at a young age as the cause of later health conditions or mental states, the research got buried or ignored. We don’t really want to look at the hard stuff. It’s easier to blame the victim for eating too much or not being happy enough than to work toward a true solution. The crowd doesn’t want Jesus to see the guy holding up the cardboard sign. They don’t want Jesus to hear the cries for mercy. And today again, after we read about yet another hate induced mass murder, this time aimed at a Jewish community in Pittsburgh, we may feel the blindness coming on – either from the comments that tell us to quit looking – there’s nothing to see here, or from the growing blindness inside as it seems like there’s too much pain for us to truly see and allow to penetrate our souls.

Which brings me to the other side of this equation – when we are already having a hard time seeing the pain in the world, how do we open up ourselves even more to being seen? I don't always like being the person in front of the camera, the one who says, look at me, listen to what I have to say. But I do think that we, as people of faith, must put ourselves more squarely in that role to turn the focus toward the people that Jesus really cared about, the ones he stopped everything for in order to show the love of God. Rather than be a part of the crowd that's telling Jesus to keep moving along, we need to stop and allow the waves of mercy to wash over us, to heal us, and help us to be a part of the healing of our world. "Son of David, have mercy on me."

What causes our blindness? For some, I do think that it's hate and anger. But for most of the people I know, it's the growing numbness that's coming from hearing story after story of pain and trauma that fuels our news cycles, and being told that there's nothing we can do to change it. There is something we can do to change it. We can allow ourselves to be seen by Jesus, to let him heal our wounds, and give us eyes to see AGAIN. We weren't always blind. We know what it's like to see one another, to feel for one another, to have compassion for the person who is hurting and afraid, to speak up for children, to expect our houses of worship to be safe.

Then we have to allow ourselves to be seen as those who are willing to indulge Jesus and his followers in whatever kind of interruptions it takes to be known as the ones who focus non-stop on those who are crying out for mercy. It's messy work. Being seen in this way isn't efficient. It doesn't create tall steeple churches with power and influence. It doesn't make us popular with the press who want to capitalize on such stories of grief. It could put us crosswise with career building government officials who were elected to represent the people but seem to have other priorities. It won't make us "good Christians" who follow the norms of how a Christian is

supposed to behave. But it does put us squarely in cooperation with Jesus and his ministry to care for the least of these, to pay attention to those who have been routinely ignored.

It isn't always safe. I can guarantee it won't be easy. But I ask you to be gentle with yourself as you begin to journey along the path that Jesus laid out for us. We won't be able to answer every call for mercy, but you can probably answer the call to mercy that is right in front of your eyes, the one that God has already put in your line of sight. Jesus was far more aware, I think, of the pain of everyone, but he chose to reach out to certain ones, the ones that caught his attention and made him pause. What is making you pause? What cry have you heard because it is the cry directed straight at you? Turn your attention that way. As you see, allow yourself to be seen, to be connected, to make the change to help that one person. The world may not immediately seem better to you, but it may make all the difference for the one who needs to know God's mercy from your heart today. Amen.