

## Proper 25B 2021 Sermon

October 24, 2021

**Mark 10:46-52** *They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimae'us son of Timae'us, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. 47 When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" 48 Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" 49 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." 50 So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. 51 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." 52 Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.*

Jesus says to the blind beggar, Bartimaeus, "What do you want me to do for you?" Bartimaeus responds, "let me see again." And Jesus says to him, "Go; your trust has made you whole." And immediately Bartimaeus regains his sight and follows Jesus on the way.

This is the very last scene Mark records in his Gospel before Jesus enters Jerusalem, where he will be crucified.

It is not the *first* time that Jesus has healed a blind man. Two chapters earlier, Jesus healed *another* blind man outside the city of Bethsaida. And between these two restorations of sight to blind men, Mark records for us several instances in which Jesus' **disciples** do not see: *they* are, in a sense, **also** blind.

One Bible scholar explains, "The Bartimaeus story serves as the concluding bookend to a section of Mark's Gospel in which blindness serves as a unifying theme. The section begins in [Chapter 8] with a story in which Jesus... restore[s] sight to a blind man at Bethsaida. In chapters 9 and 10 Jesus confronts a different kind of blindness—a *spiritual* blindness among his closest followers... who have failed to fully grasp the upside-down kingdom that Christ has brought near..."<sup>1</sup>

In this section of Mark's Gospel *between* the 2 healings of blind men, we read that **Peter** *could not see* what Jesus meant when he said he must suffer and die; and so Peter, blind to the deeper, spiritual meaning of Jesus' teaching, rebukes Jesus. In this section of Mark's Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples *again* that he must be betrayed, killed, and rise from the dead, and the disciples "[do] not understand what he [is] saying and [are] afraid to ask him." They *cannot see* the meaning of Jesus' words; they are blind to Jesus' spiritual teaching. (*Mk 9:31-32 NRSV*) In this section of Mark's Gospel, when the disciples argue among themselves who is the greatest, Jesus tells them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." (*Mk 9:34-35 NRSV*) Again, the disciples are *blind* to the upside-down values and perspectives of the kingdom of God, which Jesus preaches,

reveals, and embodies. In this section of Mark's Gospel, the Disciples James and John approach Jesus and say, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." And Jesus asks, "What is it you want me to do for you?" And they respond, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." (NRSV) They are blind to the upside-down values of God's kingdom.

Jesus asks, "What do you want me to do for you?" and James and John want status and glory: **worldly** goals. But when Jesus asks the *very same question* of blind Bartimaeus in today's Gospel, "What do you want me to do for you?", rather than asking for status or glory, Bartimaeus requests, "Teacher, let me see again."

Now, bear with me if I become somewhat analytical for a moment. There are at least 2 possible ways to translate the Greek word *anablepo* in today's Gospel. The first is, "to see again," which we find in the translation we just read. However, in 3 of the 4 **other** times that Mark uses the word *anablepo* in his Gospel, it is **not** translated "see again," but rather "look up." Look up. In the story of the multiplication of loaves and fishes, for instance, Jesus takes the 5 loaves and 2 fishes, "looks up" (*anablepo*) to heaven, and blesses and breaks the loaves for his disciples to distribute to the crowds. Why does he "look up" (*anablepo*) to heaven? To ask his Heavenly Father's blessing on what he is about to do, and to open himself to the power of God working through him.

My friends, I find this translational issue in today's Gospel to be very similar to the translation problem we run into in the story of Nicodemus in *John's* Gospel (3:1-21). You may remember that Jesus tells Nicodemus that in order to see the kingdom of God, he must be – and depending on your Bible translation, the next words are either "born again" or "born from above." Born again, or born from above. "See again," or "look up," are the choices we face in **today's** Gospel. If Bartimaeus is asking to *see again*, the implication is that there was a time in his life when he *could* see, but then he became blind. To ask Jesus to "see again" implies that Bartimaeus wants to see just the way he did before – and, in all probability, the way he saw *before* was the *same* way James and John see: through the perspective and mindset of the kingdom of this world. But if Bartimaeus is asking Jesus to let him "look up," he might well be asking, "let me see from above." It is a request to see life through God's eyes, from the perspective of the kingdom of God. "No one can *see* the kingdom of God without being born from above." (*Jn 3:3, NRSV*)

And, I believe that *that is* what Bartimaeus desires – not simply to physically "see again" (though I'm sure that's part of his desire), but also to "look up," that he might see and know heavenly things, see from above, see the kingdom of God.

Now, we know that people who lose one of their senses – their eyesight or their hearing, for example – often develop their remaining senses to a greater extent than those of us who have **all** our senses. Helen Keller expressed “gratitude to God for having given the blind seeing minds.”<sup>2</sup> What if Bartimaeus, deprived of his *physical* sight, has developed, to a higher degree than most, his *spiritual* sight – the eyes of his soul?

We already know that Bartimaeus sees very clearly some spiritual truths. He is the **first** person in Mark’s Gospel to call Jesus “Son of David” (the Messiah was supposed to come from the lineage of David). And, although many in the crowd try to *silence* Bartimaeus when he cries out to Jesus, (perhaps thinking that Jesus did not have time for a blind beggar), Bartimaeus **sees** clearly, with the eyes of his soul, that Jesus is merciful and desires healing and wholeness for **all** – even a blind beggar. “Have mercy on me,” he cries out again, seeing with the eyes of his soul that this man Jesus is able and eager to give mercy and grace in abundance. And this **trust** in Jesus’ ability and desire to save, to heal, **is** the faith that Jesus says makes him well.

And so, we can see that Bartimaeus has an advantage over Jesus’ Disciples: Because he could not *physically* see, he has developed an **inner** sight that can see the world of the spirit in a way the Disciples, seeing through *worldly* eyes, cannot.

And Bartimaeus has *another* advantage over Jesus’ Disciples: He lives **outside** the mainstream culture and society of the day. The Jews of Jesus’ day believed that blindness was a sign of punishment from God for some sin. We know this because in *John’s* Gospel, Jesus’ Disciples, upon meeting a man born blind, ask Jesus, “Who sinned – this man or his parents – that he was born blind?” (*John 9:2, NRSV*) Bartimaeus is seen by his fellow Jews as a **sinner** of sufficient magnitude that God has taken away his sight as punishment. He is low, indeed, on the scale of worthiness as deemed by his society; he lives beyond the pale, on the margins. In his wildest dreams, he could never envision for himself the kind of status that James and John ask for – to be seated at the right or left hand of Jesus in glory. Unimaginable. But, like the slaves in 19<sup>th</sup> Century America, who, knowing they could never have *any* degree of status in the **world’s** eyes, developed instead a deep faith in Jesus because they *knew* he favored the lowly, so Bartimaeus sees with the eyes of his soul that this man Jesus has compassion even for a blind beggar. Bartimaeus doesn’t rely on his own *worthiness*, but rather trusts, has faith, in the mercy, love, and grace of Jesus. This gives him a huge advantage over James and John, who believe they *deserve* seats at Jesus left and right hand in glory.

“I came into this world,” Jesus says in John’s Gospel, “...so that those who do *not* see may see, and those who *do* see may become blind.” (*Jn 9:39 NRSV*) Blind to the worldly visions of glory and merit and ego, so that we might look up and see, with the eyes of our soul, the kingdom of God.

AMEN

1 Victor McCracken, *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Year B, Volume 4: Season After Pentecost 2 (Propers 17-Reign of Christ)*, WordSearch edition

2 Letter to Dr. Finley, January 13, 1932. <https://www.afb.org/about-afb/history/helen-keller/books-essays-speeches/new-york-city>