

PROPER 25, PENTECOST 22, YEAR B, OCTOBER 24, 2021

The healing of Bartimaeus in today's gospel is a beautiful and layered story. It's a story not only about the healing of Bartimaeus' physical blindness but also the physical and spiritual blindness of the surrounding crowd. Even though Bartimaeus is the blind person in the story, it's the crowd, his peers, his culture, his society that have rendered him unseen. He is the invisible man by the roadside who is expendable. His cries are not worthy of their attention and his suffering is not important enough to evoke any kind of tenderness, patience or curiosity from the people around him. It's only when Bartimaeus dares to speak out that the only reasonable thing for them to do is to shut him up so they can continue to keep him out of their sight which keeps them comfortable.

But that comfort is precisely what Jesus renders impossible. When Jesus stops and addresses Bartimaeus, it is then that the crowds actually stop to "see" him. Once the crowd sees Bartimaeus, they can't unsee him. By calling to him Jesus opens their eyes to Bartimaeus' full humanity because Jesus sees Bartimaeus as worthy. This makes the crowds look at Bartimaeus differently so they respond with some compassion instead of contempt. So, they tell him Jesus is calling him. What the blind man needs is not just physical sight alone; he also needs visibility and validation within his community.

Who are the people in our community who are left unseen? Who do we keep on the margins because we don't want to see them? What happens if we do "see" them or acknowledge them? Author Nora Gallagher puts it this way: "I remember thinking as I worked in the soup kitchen that I didn't want to know what I was learning. Because then my life couldn't go on in the same way as it had before: driving around in my nice red Volvo, thinking about what new linens to buy. What we learn we cannot unlearn," she says. "What we see, we cannot unsee."

Seeing is more than just physical sight but also a metaphor for understanding as when we say, "I see what you're saying" and we gain new insight into the situation. That inner insight is just as important as our physical sight. When I was the rector in Denville the Social services director for the town was a member of the congregation. We decided to have her speak to the children in the Sunday School about the children in their own community who were in need. She told them about adopting families at Christmas time and said how many of the children requested coats or blankets or shoes. The children were absolutely incredulous to think that a child would ask for a coat or a blanket and not a toy. Sometimes we are blinded to others needs when our own basic needs are being met. Sometimes we need to take our blinders off to truly understand and see who and what is going on in our community.

It's no wonder our readings for today speak of the human capacity to move through life with eyes wide open-yet unseeing. In Eucharistic prayer C, which we are currently using, we say, "Open our eyes to see your hand at work in the world about us." We make this petition because sometimes we are simply blind to the God who seeks us out or simply because our definition and understanding of God is too small. And when our God is too small our vision becomes very dim and we don't see how we are to be partners with God in this world of ours.

An interesting note in today's story is that it is Bartimaeus who really sees who Jesus is. He calls him Son of David, or Messiah which no one else has called Jesus. In

his blindness Bartimaeus has the ability to grasp the reality of Jesus in the way the others can't. So when Jesus asks him what he wants he says Jesus let me see again.

If Jesus were here today and asked us that same question, what can I do for you, what would you ask? What's your heart's deepest desire? Where do you want Jesus to intercede in your life, in the world we inhabit? Perhaps it would be to rid our world of the pandemic, and all internal viruses that produce hatred, discontent and inequality. Perhaps you would pray for healing and wholeness, a miracle for yourself or for someone you love. Perhaps you might pray for this fragile earth and our responsibility to care for creation. I suspect there would be many responses for each one of us today. There's no lack of where we need Jesus to intercede in our lives and in our world.

But I think the question we need to ask ourselves is how do we, like Bartimaeus, see more deeply, more clearly, as Jesus sees? How do we see more deeply, right past the societal differences that we might place upon one another? How do we see the things that really matter about another. How do we go more deeply? How do we see more deeply, past these human distinctions that we may place upon one another?

If you go back to the story, you will see that Jesus tells Bartimaeus that his faith has made him well. It is his faith of seeing who Jesus is that makes him whole. But it is also his faith that allows him to see how Jesus sees and that's why he follows him. He has been given a new purpose, a new way of living, a new way of being because of Jesus and he wants to be able to continue to give that to others.

God in Jesus is what our faith is all about. But our faith isn't and shouldn't be static. Faith requires, even demands, an ongoing conversation to comprehend how God lives in our personal lives and how we come to know the light of God in the midst of all the happenings in the world.

How do we open our eyes to be faithful in a new way? Granted it's much easier to focus only on the joyful parts of faith--God's love for everyone, God's desire for our well-being, God's mercy and the hope we find in God. But faith doesn't involve only the joyful parts, does it? A mature faith also engages the hard things...things like suffering, betrayal, and death, and poverty and human trafficking and corporate corruption and climate change and hunger and domestic violence. Joyful faith looks on the happy parts of life. Mature faith dares to look at the hard parts, too.

It's easy to criticize Jesus' disciples for not seeing the truth he was showing. Perhaps deep down they knew that once they really saw what Jesus was showing them, they wouldn't be able to unsee it again. Once they got what he was saying about the reality of the world, their lives were going to have to change. Once they got that following Jesus would lead them to suffering, betrayal, and death, their rose-colored-glasses faith would no longer sustain them. Maybe the disciples avoided seeing what Jesus was showing them because deep down they knew--seeing can be dangerous.

Yes, seeing can be dangerous. It can call into question everything we've ever believed. It can upset our faith, our theology, our worldview. But seeing as Jesus sees is the most important aspect to the life of our faith and that's how our faith grows and matures

But...if seeing is important to the life of faith and also has the potential to upset us, what are we to do? Do we keep our hearts open but our eyes closed? Do we keep our eyes open but our hearts closed? Is there some way as a person of faith to keep both our eyes and our hearts open?

For Bartimaeus Jesus became the context in which he saw everything. When we look at the world in the context of Jesus, it's true--we will see suffering, betrayal and even death. It's unavoidable. However, a mature faith looks at those places and also sees resurrection.

So back to the question, what do you want Jesus to do for you? Let us pray that he will give us eyes to see as he does and that we will not turn a blind eye to the need that's right in front of us. Let us ask for ears to hear, to hear his call, to hear the call of the person on the margins who is crying out for mercy and compassion and our help. And finally we ask to give us hearts to respond—open hearts so that we too will go and follow Jesus wherever he may lead us and help us to always see resurrection. It is then that our eyes will be fully open to really see God's encompassing love for all. Amen.