

Epworth Chapel on the Green
October 25, 2015
Pentecost 22
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 59:1-19
Psalm 13
Hebrews 5:12-6:1, 9-12
Mark 10:46-52

Our Gospel lesson today finds Jesus and his disciples leaving Jericho and heading toward Jerusalem, where he has told his disciples that he will suffer and die.

His disciples are slow to understand this. They are unable to “see” it. From the first verse in Mark’s Gospel, where Mark tells us that his Gospel is about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, the Gospel is the unfolding story of how the disciples and others gradually come to “see” that what Mark proclaims is true. It is the story of a progression from spiritual blindness to spiritual sight.

Today’s story of Jesus’ encounter with Bartimaeus -- the last incident before Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem -- highlights for us one last time this progression in Mark from blindness to sight. The placement of this story on the heels of James and John’s request for positions of power in Jesus’ kingdom further serves to bring it to the center of our attention.

Immediately after James and John ask Jesus to be his right hand man and his left hand man in the kingdom, Jesus encounters Bartimaeus on the way to Jerusalem.

I believe that Mark places these two stories together for an important reason. By way of contrast, he emphasizes the unfolding process of coming to “see” who Jesus is that has been center stage in his Gospel.

In the case of James and John, they have sight, but they cannot *see*. They still don't get it. They've been with Jesus, seen his ministry, witnessed him at work. And yet when he asks them, “what can I do for you?” their response is: “we want to have the seats of power and honor next to you in your kingdom.”

James and John ask Jesus to be “seen,” to be superior to ordinary people. They have their sight, but they cannot *see*.

Bartimaeus, on the other hand, does not have his sight. But oh, how he can *see*. As Jesus passes by the side of the road where he sits, he shouts out, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”

The people try to silence him, to push him to the margin, but he's lived on the edge of the margin all his life, and he has nothing more to lose. So he calls out again for Jesus.

Jesus hears him, and stops.

Now, Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem where he is about to fulfill his ministry of dying for the whole world. He's got suffering to do, and a world to save. He's got no time for distractions.

But make no mistake. The Bartimaeus' of the world are not distractions to Jesus' ministry, they ARE Jesus' ministry.

And so Jesus asks Bartimaeus the same question he asked James and John: "What do you want me to do for you?"

For James and John, the answer was: "we want to be seen, to be superior to ordinary people."

Bartimaeus says: "I want to see. I want to become ordinary."

Jesus tells him: "Go your way. Your faith has made you whole."

Do you see the irony in this? Bartimaeus wants his sight, but he can already see. James and John can see and want to be seen, yet they have no sight.

Notice what happens at the end of this story. Jesus heals this man and tells him, "go your way." But what does he do? The text tells us, "he followed Jesus down the road."

The phrase "down the road" is also rendered "on the way," and it is a term Mark uses for true and authentic disciples of Jesus. Bartimaeus didn't go his own way. He cast his lot with Jesus, and followed him -- right to Jerusalem.

I cannot prove this, but I have a hunch that when Jesus and the disciples entered Jerusalem and things began to turn sour and when Peter denied Jesus, Bartimaeus was present in the shadows, standing strong. For Bartimaeus had been given more than his physical sight. Through eyes of faith, Bartimaeus could truly *see*.

Now, what word does this text wish to speak to us today?

In our hearts, if we were honest, we would acknowledge that we are often more like James and John than we are like Bartimaeus. In our weaker moments, we are more likely to say, “Lord, let me be *seen*,” rather than “Lord, please help me to *see*.”

In our weaker moments, we are prone to say, “Lord, *I* want to pull the strings, *I* want to control outcomes, *I* want to have my way, and when it’s done, *I* want the credit.”

In our weaker moments, we are so busy clamoring for our own way that we don’t even hear the cries of Bartimaeus outside in the streets, and we become blind to even noticing him as we pass by on our way home from church.

The Good News of the Gospel is that Jesus stands in our midst this morning, and he asks us the same question he asked James and John and Bartimaeus: “What do you want me to do for you?”

By the grace of God, let the cries of our hearts flow up in unison to say:
“Lord, help us to *see*.”

As we come to the Table this morning, let us come asking God to give us grace to see and love others as Jesus sees and loves us. Let us ask Jesus to give us our sight, and then to translate that sight into deeds of love -- not merely to the Bartimaeus' of the world who await us, but also to each other.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.