

Let Us See Again

Mark 10: 46-52

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. 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.



On the cover of your bulletins is a famous painting by Vincent Van Gogh entitled *Café Terrace at Night*. When the painting was first exhibited in 1891, it had been one year after Van Gogh died. Since he wasn't around to give it a name himself, it was given the title based on what his interpreters saw. They originally named it *Coffeehouse* for obvious reasons; later it became permanently known as *Café Terrace at Night*. In the painting we see a typical Van Gogh starry night sky and spectators taking a romantic evening stroll. We see people who are dining at tables and a server who waits on them. At a glance the painting is a romantic scene on an ordinary evening.

Not too long ago, however, someone began seeing the artwork in a different light that told a deeper story. They happened to count the number of customers sitting at the tables: eleven. They noticed a shadowy figure fleeing out the door in a hurry and that makes twelve. Then there's the server who seems to be draped in a long white vestment with a cross above him in

the window frame. Suddenly the casual painting takes on a deeper meaning. No longer do we see only a romantic starry night, but Jesus with his disciples dining at the Last Supper. We notice Judas scurrying out the door to betray him and the cross looming in the background. It's there, sometimes we just need some help in seeing it.

In the gospel of Mark, Jesus performs one final miracle before heading to the cross: he heals a blind man named Bartimaeus. On the surface it looks like a typical miracle story: Bartimaeus calls out to Jesus, his faith heals him, and he follows Jesus on his way. But I wonder if, like the Van Gogh work, the gospel of Mark is trying to paint something deeper for us to see.

One of the issues I believe we struggle with these days is that it is hard to see beyond the surface level. As we anxiously go about our busy and stressful lives; as we absorb images and information at copious rates, it is difficult to delve deeper beyond the surface. It is especially concerning to me when we are unable to see beyond the surface in the church. It has been said that the heresy of our faith today is not a lack of belief, it is superficiality. It's a reducing of the gospel into a matter of personal principles on how to live a happier, more prosperous life. We smooth out the gospel's edges. We soften its resolve. We keep the gospel on a superficial level because following the gospel is hard.

Once a minister was on a plane heading home. He was jotting down some notes for next Sunday's sermon. A gentleman next to him saw him scribbling words on a legal pad and said, "I'm sorry for intruding, but I couldn't help but notice that you were taking a bunch of notes. May I ask what you are doing?" "Well, I'm a minister," he said, "and I'm putting down some thoughts for next Sunday's sermon." The inquiring man retorted, "Well, I don't get mixed up in the ins and outs of church stuff, I just live by the Golden Rule, 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.'" "I see," said the minister, "Now tell me what you do?" "Well, I am a professor at the university. I teach astronomy." "Ah," the minister responded, "I don't get mixed up in the ins and outs of astronomy. 'Twinkle, twinkle, little star how I wonder what you are.'" The heresy of our time is not that we aren't good people who don't believe, it is that when we do, it can too often be superficial.

Jesus is heading into deep waters as he journeys to Jerusalem. As him and his disciples are well on their way, a blind beggar named Bartimaeus gets excited and begins shouting, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" "Shhh, Be quiet!" the disciples say. But, Bartimaeus is off the chain and cranks the amps up louder, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy!!!" So Jesus calls him over, as the beggar leaves his cloak behind. Jesus asks, "What would you like me to do?" And what does Bartimaeus say? "My teacher, let me see again."

Again!? What does he mean by, "again?" Apparently, this is someone who has seen before, but something has happened, so he sees no more. Now some might say, that blind Bartimaeus was an old man at this point and his cataracts started giving him problems. Others think he must've had an accident or a genetic condition. On the surface it seems likely, but I think the gospel of Mark is trying to tell us something deeper.

You see, the blindness Bartimaeus experiences isn't only about a physical condition. The gospel of Mark is also talking about the blindness of the human condition that every single one of us experiences again and again. There are times when we see clearly how we are to live as disciples of the gospel; and then there are times when we struggle with our blindness and we can't see it.

Take me for example: I know what the gospel says about consumerism. It says that consumerism is a demonic force in my life that is not only superficial, but it will cling to me like a parasite painting lies about what abundant life looks like. I know what the gospel says about consumerism. But there I am at Costco hypnotized by a 55-inch flat screen LED television that is on sale and it begins to whisper, "I think I can fill something that's missing in your life right now." I know what the gospel says about consumerism, but I can't always see it.

And I know what the gospel says about unity. About how the person sitting across from me may not believe or think or feel the way I do about things. That I am to look at them in a deeper way, with eyes of love because they too are a child of God, made in God's image. But when I listen to some of the things that come out of their mouths, I am quick to judge and dismiss them into the group where the "others" belong. I know what the gospel says about unity, but my blindness won't allow me to see it.

I also know what the gospel says about hope. It says that God has promised a new day when justice will arrive; and resurrection will conquer all of death's ways; and there will be a new heaven and a new earth. I know what the gospel says about hope. But when I look into the world and see the news about people murdered in a Jewish synagogue. When I see the faces of the people I love getting older and sicker. When I see the chronically abused earth that I am handing down to my children, I become afraid. I know what the gospel says about hope, but I can't always see it.

And here's the thing: I know what it would take for me to see again. It would take a miracle.

It's why blind Bartimaeus relentlessly get louder and louder: "Have mercy on me!" It's why Jesus calls him over and asks "What would you like me to do?" And why blind Bartimaeus names his deepest desire, "Let me see again."

Because we know deep down what the gospel looks like, we just need a miracle to see it.

Last year a photographer named Johnathan Kelso—who is a white Florida native—grabbed his high-powered digital camera and began taking pictures across six Southern states. His calling, he says, is documenting some of the significant horrific events done against African Americans during the Jim Crow Era. He says a lifetime of white privilege has allowed him to walk blindly through life. He has heard the stories, but wants to see and specifically to help the church see again. He captures a picture of the old grocery store where Emmitt Till was accused of whistling at a white woman and the shed where Emmitt Till was tortured and killed in Mississippi. In Arkansas, he snaps the picture of a single marked tombstone with a vast farm field in the

background. Underneath the surface of that single marked stone lies a mass grave of hundreds of bodies that were lynched. There's a photograph of a photo of Maceo Snipes, a World War II veteran who was the first African-American to vote in a Democratic Primary in Taylor County, Georgia. The day after he cast his ballot, he was shot in the back and killed. As our eyes graze over one picture at a time; as we see deeper into the expressions, perhaps we can hear an echo of the prayer of blind Bartimaeus rising within us: "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me. Now, let us see again."

In our Stewardship season, we do more than fill out pledge cards; we take a deeper look at what we are doing and why we are doing it. The truth is, we can't do much of anything if we can't see it. So let's take a moment to pray for mercy, for our blindness to be lifted, for the church's eyes to be opened once again. Because under the surface we know what the gospel looks like. It's just sometimes we need a miracle to see it.