

Year B Proper 30 The Blind Beggar Sees More Than We Know Mark 10 46 to 52

Today's gospel story begins with the disciples trying to shush the blind beggar, Bartimaeus, who is excitedly trying to get Jesus' attention. This isn't the first time the disciples have tried to shush someone, to shut someone down. They tried to shoo away the Canaanite woman who wanted Jesus to heal her daughter – the woman who had said even the dogs get to eat the crumbs that fall off the table. They tried to send away the crowd who needed to be fed. They tried to move Jesus along instead of interacting with the woman who had touched the hem of his cloak in order to heal her bleeding. They put the kibosh on another healer exorcising demons in Jesus' name because that healer wasn't part of their group. And now here they are again, trying to shush this blind beggar.

Who is it that the disciples are trying to shoo away or shut down? The hungry, the non-Jewish, the people sent to the fringes of society because of their ailments, and those who are not "in" their group. Sometimes, I shake my head in frustration at the disciples and picture Jesus doing that too. Why do they not understand what Jesus is trying to teach them? Then I think to myself, I need to cut them some slack. They are living out what they've been taught from childhood. They were taught that certain people got the best seats at the feast because of their social standing. They were taught that people with diseases, people with disabilities, people with no money...those people were pushed to the fringes of society. Canaanites and other non-Jewish people – they were "out". You didn't associate with them. That's just the way it was. The disciples had these "rules" drilled into their heads. That's the way the disciples operated because that's the way the rest of their society operated. Jesus had some pretty strong "norms" to fight against. In fact, Peter even tried to shush Jesus. Remember that?

When Jesus told his disciples he had to die, Peter said, “No way, that mustn’t be”. The messiah doesn’t die. Jesus set Peter straight right away by saying Peter was thinking the way the world thinks. Shortly before today’s Gospel story takes place, Jesus has tried to tell his disciples once again that he must die and James and John ask if they can have the places of honour on his right and on his left...Again, thinking the way the world thinks.

So, within this Gospel story, we have a physically blind beggar who really cannot see and we have the disciples whose eyesight is fine but they can’t see either.

It's easy to criticize the disciples for their inability to see the things Jesus is showing them but, like I said, let’s cut them some slack. The things Jesus is showing them aren't easy. On the one hand, he’s asking them to go against accepted societal norms. And on the other hand, he’s asking them to accept his own betrayal, suffering, and death. What might any of us do if our beloved teacher told us these things? Some things are just too hard to grasp; some things are better left alone; sometimes seeing isn't all it's cracked up to be.

That is true in our lives of faith as well. It's much easier for us to focus only on the happy parts of faith—God loves us, God loves everyone, God desires what’s best for us, Jesus brought us the hope of a perfect world and eternal life with God. But faith doesn't involve only the happy parts. Our faith must also embrace the hard things...things like feeling betrayed by friends, our sufferings, the sufferings of others, the death of loved ones, poverty, human trafficking, corporate corruption, corruption of some world leaders, hate crimes, climate change, hunger, elder abuse...the list is long and I could go on. All faith looks on the happy parts of life. Mature faith dares to look at the hard parts, too.

But when we see the world's brokenness, something changes in us. We lose some of our innocence, we hurt inside because we care, and we can't unsee it...we can't forget what we've seen.

There was a photojournalist named Kevin Carter covering the famine in the Sudan back in 1993. Kevin took a picture of a small girl who had collapsed while walking to a food station. Just a few feet behind the starving girl, a vulture stalked her.

In May of 1994, Kevin won a Pulitzer Prize for the photograph. Two months later, he committed suicide. A close friend of Kevin's said that after taking the photo of the starving girl, Kevin "sat under a tree and cried and chain-smoked" and could not distance himself from the horror of what he had seen. He could not *unsee* what he had seen.

Do we really blame the disciples, then, for not wanting to open their eyes and see what Jesus was trying to teach them? Once they opened their eyes and accepted what he was saying, they wouldn't be able to unsee it. They wouldn't, in good conscience, be able to follow the accepted social norms in their society...the norms that put people in their place, the norms that say it's just the way the world works that Westerners have more than enough while young African girls drop from starvation on their way to food depots, the norms that shut out the infirm, and close their doors to those of a different religion or social status. And, if they opened their eyes, they would have to accept that their friend and teacher – their Messiah – was going to die.

How do they survive this? How do we survive this? How do we survive seeing what's horrible in our world, caring so much, and wanting to change things so

badly. How do we survive the breaking of the societal norms imbedded in our brains as we grew up? Norms from previous generations included such “facts” as “Indians are all drunks. They’re less than human.” “Homosexuality is evil – it’s a crime to be punished for.” We know that it’s important to see the hard things along with the good...Jesus showed his disciples – and us – again and again how they should really see the world. He told them over and over that he would suffer and die. So how do we see the world the way we need to see it and yet not let that devastate us? We look to the blind beggar, Bartimaeus, and to Jesus for our answer.

Bartimaeus knew beyond a doubt that Jesus could heal him. He knew he’d been pushed to the fringe and would have to work at getting close to Jesus. He had to work his way through those still clinging to the societal norms they had been taught. Bartimaeus couldn’t see a thing but he looked to Jesus. When we look to Jesus, we will still see betrayal, suffering, death, and everything else that is wrong in our world. But, we will also see Jesus’ resurrection. And with that resurrection is our hope. Because Jesus now lives, we live with him. It is this hope that gives us the strength to see the bad, to see what needs to be undone. It is this hope that gives us the courage and desire to change these things because we know that we are working in God’s kingdom – a kingdom that will one day be perfect – where all people, all of creation are reconciled to God through Jesus Christ. And the norms we are breaking today – norms of oppression, stereotyping, prejudices – the norms we break will give way to the norms of God’s kingdom...equality, compassion, love, abundance for all.

And Jesus said to Bartimaeus, “your faith has made you well”. Does that sound familiar? It should. To the woman who touched his garment and healed her bleeding, Jesus said, “Your faith has healed you.” And to the Canaanite woman who would eat the crumbs under the table? Jesus said, “You have great faith! And her daughter was healed. Faith brings healing and wholeness because faith has power – the power of a resurrected, present Lord...in whom lies our hope, our courage, our strength, our partner.

Let us hear those words as Jesus speaks them to us. “Go, your faith has made you well.”