

The Touch of the Healer: What Do You Want?

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Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

Mark 10:46-52

Have you ever read a short story that is so rich and deep and in-depth that it takes a surprisingly long time to get through? Or the opposite? A loooooong book that is easy to fly through in no time, despite its length?

I remember my High School senior English class, when the teacher assigned the book *Heart of Darkness*. When she passed it out, I was so excited, because it was so short, especially in comparison with a lot of the other books we had been reading that year. But after reading the first two pages, I wasn't sure I would ever make it through the whole book. It required so much thought. Contrast that with, say, the Harry Potter books, some of which are 800 pages long, but which you can fly through at warp speeds.

Today's scripture reading isn't a hard read, but it is a deep one, even though it is short. It's only seven verses long – but these seven verses are absolutely *packed* with beauty and nuance.

This is actually the second story in Mark's gospel of Jesus healing a blind man. The first story was back in chapter 8 – and it was kind-of a weird little 2-part healing story, where Jesus spits on the ground, and makes mud out of his saliva, and puts the spit-mud on the blind man's eyes. Then, when the blind man opens his eyes he can only sort-of see – he can see people, but they look like trees. And so then Jesus places his hands on the man a second time, and this time his eyesight is completely restored.

That strange little story marks the mid-point of Mark's gospel, and from there on out, the whole gospel shifted, from Jesus going about his happy, light-hearted teaching and healing ministry, to a frustrating few chapters of Jesus predicting his death, and the disciples misunderstanding, and Jesus again predicting his death, and the disciples again not getting it, and Jesus again predicting his death, and the disciples arguing with him about it.

Right before today's story, we have this scene where the disciples James and John are kind-of on a bit of an ego trip, and so they approach Jesus. "What do you want me to do for you," Jesus asks them. And they respond: "When you come into your kingdom, we want to sit right next to you. One of us on your right, and one of us on your left." Basically, "we want status. We want glory. We want to be seen. We want to be important. We want you to confirm for us that we are your favorite disciples."

And Jesus answers by refusing to answer. "That's not for me to grant. But here's what I'll tell you: If you want to be great, you must humble yourself. Not elevate yourself. Discipleship is not about climbing the ladder to success. Following Jesus is not about

being important and having all the right answers and carrying clout and influence and power. In fact, it is just the opposite. Following Jesus means following him to the cross. Humbling ourselves just as Jesus humbled himself.

And then, we have this one final healing story, which will be the very last one in Mark's gospel before Jesus and the disciples make their final entry into Jerusalem.

And in this story, we have another blind man. Interestingly, of all of the people that Jesus heals in Mark's gospel, this is the *only* one who has a name. Bartimaeus. Literally, "Son of Timaeus." So, right off the bat, we know two things about him. He is a person with his own identity. And he is a person with a family.

But he is evidently not a person with a very loving family, or a very supportive family. Because he is living as a beggar on the roadside. He is blind. And when people had disabilities back in that day and age, they were basically forced to the fringes of society. They were seen as cursed by God, or sometimes their disability would be viewed as a punishment from God, either for something that they themselves had done or something that their parents or grandparents or even long-ago ancestors had done. Sometimes, disabilities like blindness or deafness or lameness were seen as contagious diseases, like leprosy. Folks were afraid that if they got too close to somebody who was blind, they too would go blind. Or, they were afraid that if a person was blind as a result of God's punishment, if they helped that person they would anger God and they themselves would be subject to God's punishment.

People with disabilities couldn't get a job, because even if they had skills people were afraid to employ them. There was no social safety net for them. Sometimes even their own family members were afraid of them, or else did not have the resources to support them, and so they would be cast out of the family and left to fend for themselves.

And then, there is the matter of this man's name. I mentioned that this is the only person in Mark's gospel who Jesus heals, whose name we know. And that is no accident. Because in this case, his name is important. "Bartimaeus." Or, "Son of Timaeus." For those who would have been reading or hearing this story back in the day, they would have been familiar with an immensely popular essay by the Greek philosopher Plato titled "Timaeus." In this essay, Plato's main character Timaeus writes:

The sight in my opinion is the source of the greatest benefit to us, for had we never seen the stars and the sun and the heaven, none of the words which we have spoken about the universe would ever have been uttered.... God invented and gave us sight that we might behold the courses of intelligence in the heaven, and apply them to the courses of our own intelligence which are akin to them.

So in this essay, through the character Timaeus, Plato is basically saying that the source of all of our intelligence – all of our comprehension – all of our awareness of everything in the earth and the heavens – all of our understanding of who God is and who we are, comes from what we can see. Now, of course, today we know that not to be true. But, it

would have been a pervasive idea at the time. The idea that we only know what we know, because we can see it. And the idea that if you can't see, then you can't know, and thus, you must be ignorant of all things.

But then, Jesus flips the script. "Here's some irony for you," Jesus is saying. "Timaeus – the man who placed all of his faith in his sense of sight – had a son. A son who was named after him, no less. Bartimaeus. Son of Timaeus. And his son was blind."

So not only was Bartimaeus pushed to the outside of society; deemed "cursed by God;" feared and avoided by everybody, because people thought they could catch what he had. Unemployable and forced to beg on the corners for everything he had. But his very name was a reminder of what the world thought of him. Ignorant. Stupid. Addled in the head. Less than a human being – because he didn't possess that one thing that makes people fundamentally intelligent, fundamentally human: sight.

And yet, as the story unfolds, we begin to discover that this man can see and understand things that very few people with working eyes can.

First, when Jesus and his disciples are leaving Jericho and passing by where Bartimaeus was sitting, and Bartimaeus hears that it is Jesus, he knows *exactly* who Jesus is. He has, no doubt, heard rumors about Jesus, but he is the very first person in Mark's gospel to draw connections between Jesus and the Old Testament prophecies, and to recognize that Jesus just might be the promised messiah. "Son of David," Bartimaeus calls out to him. Bartimaeus is the first person in Mark's gospel to call Jesus that. He sees something in Jesus that the people with eyes don't see.

And then, when Jesus calls him to come to him, he doesn't just get up and feel his way carefully in that direction. He jumps up. He flings off his cloak. Maybe not a big deal for somebody who can see. But for somebody who is both blind and homeless – that cloak is the only little bit of shelter that he has. He needs that cloak. His life depends on that cloak. And if he is just flinging it around haphazardly in the middle of a crowd? He's never going to be able to find that cloak again. He is saying, in no uncertain terms, "I no longer need this." There isn't a shred of doubt in his mind that Jesus is going to give him back his sight. Before he has even *made it* to Jesus, he knows that his old life is over and his new life has begun. And so, throwing his cloak aside and *running* to Jesus as only a man who can see could, he was behaving as though he were healed, before the act of healing ever took place. Before he had even *asked* Jesus to heal him. That is faith, my friends.

I love here the question that Jesus asks Bartimaeus. "What do you want me to do for you?" Does that question sound familiar? It's the very same question that Jesus had just asked James and John in the last story, before they started going off about sitting on Jesus' right and left sides in glory.

Same exact question. But Bartimaeus's answer couldn't have been more different from that of the disciples. He wasn't asking for riches or glory or power or prestige. He wasn't asking to be better than anybody else. All he wanted was to see again. And not so that he could work and make money and climb up the ladder of society. Not so that he could go back home again and re-join his family who had kicked him out. We see that the very first thing that Bartimaeus does, once he has re-gained his sight, is to follow Jesus. To join the ranks of those who have no home and no riches, and are called not to be served but to serve. And where does he follow Jesus? The very next step on the path is Jerusalem, where Jesus begins his journey to the cross.

It's interesting, isn't it? That no matter how Jesus tried to prepare his disciples for what would happen next, they refused to see it. All they could think about was jockeying for position in the kingdom of heaven. Who was going to be the greatest? Who would be the least? And who would get to sit closest to Jesus? Who would be God's favorite?

And yet, the blind man who, in the eyes of everyone – the crowds, the disciples, the educated and elite, even his own family – everyone assumed he was worthless as a human being – this blind beggar was able to see not just who Jesus was and what Jesus was about, but also where Jesus was going and what that meant for him as a follower. He could see the things of God, when even Jesus' closest followers were fixated on the most shallow of all day-to-day nonsense.

So my friends, here's the question for us today: And it is the same question that Jesus asks not just Bartimaeus, but also his disciples: "What do you want?" Or more specifically, "What do you want me to do for you?"

In your heart of hearts, what are you longing for?
What are you looking for, from God?

Some of us (maybe even most of us) are probably a lot like the disciples. We've spent a lifetime following Jesus in some cases; there is definitely a close relationship there; but sometimes our day-to-day concerns just get downright petty. "God, please help so-and-so see that I am right." "God, I'm running late. Can you please make this truck in front of me on Hwy 34 go faster?"

And to be sure, God does care about the little, throwaway moments of our lives. But God also invites us to go deeper than that. To see beyond what is right in front of us; to see beyond those things that are visible to our naked eyes; and to see underneath all of that the beauty and the nuance of the kingdom of God. To look beyond the blind beggar and to see instead a child of God filled with wisdom and understanding. To see beyond the slow-moving truck on the highway, and perhaps see an invitation from God to slow down and notice what we ordinarily zoom right past. To look beyond the unhinged perspectives of people who we might disagree with and to discover where that little kernel of truth might lie, that little bit of truth that can expand our perspectives somewhat. To look beyond our physical ailments and to see a God who may not always

bring us instantaneous healing in the ways that we would like, but who always brings us on a journey toward wholeness in the ways that we most need.

To look beyond where we are and to see where God is calling us; and then, to toss away our cloaks and begin that journey even now, when our blinders are still up. Because we know that if we wait for everything to be perfect before we begin to follow Jesus, we will be waiting our entire lives. But if we follow God's call, even when we don't know where God is leading us or how we will get there, we know that wherever we go, God will have our backs.

And so, my friends, may we today find our eyes opened, that we might catch a glimpse the kingdom of God before us – a kingdom of love, of hope, and of possibility. And with our eyes opened, may we follow Jesus with joy, having faith that the journey will lead us straight into the open arms of God.