

Blindness

Our gospel reading from Mark at first glance seems to be the narration of just another healing by Jesus. Yet a close reading of the text can reveal a more complex message. This episode where blindness is healed is not totally unique as Mark has previously narrated an encounter between Jesus and a blind man at Bethsaida. There are some interesting differences between these two encounters. At Bethsaida, “some people” bring a blind man to Jesus. They ask Jesus to touch him. Bethsaida is still very much located in the Galilean countryside, although this happens just before Jesus begins describing what his role as messiah means. This timing indicates that Jesus has not yet reached the moment when he sets his face toward Jerusalem. Today’s passage happens at Jericho as Jesus nears Jerusalem and the fulfillment of his role as the anointed one, the messiah. In the passages Mark gives us just before this encounter, Jesus has been repeatedly instructing those with him about his role and about their discipleship. In this text, the blind man himself seeks Jesus’ help. Those around this blind man seek to prevent him from encountering Jesus. So that is the first rather obvious difference about this meeting. At the first encounter, Jesus’ response is to take the man apart from the crowd before he begins to restore his sight. Then the process is a two-step one where what Jesus does at first restores some sight but what is seen is unclear. And when Jesus put his hands on the man a second time so that he saw everything clearly, the man was then told to go home but not to go into the village. It was a very discrete healing. At Jericho, on the other hand, Jesus summons the man to him in front of the crowd over the interference of the crowd which is following him. This man, although blind, knows Jesus’ identity. It is the blind man who initiates the encounter—who seeks him—calling out “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Jesus restores his sight simply by telling him “Go, your faith has made you well.” Not only is it not necessary for Jesus to touch the man twice, but not even one touch is needed. In this encounter we usually focus on the healing aspect of what happens. But there is more here than a simple demonstration of Jesus’ healing power. What is clear in this text is that Bartimaeus from the beginning, before his sight is restored, grasps who Jesus is. Despite the disciples being with Jesus for his whole Galilean ministry, they still have not yet been able to perceive so much about Jesus. Having much more data, they still do not understand Jesus or his mission as evidenced by the preceding passages where they are concerned about themselves. The title Bartimaeus used to call out to Jesus after hearing that it was Jesus of Nazareth who was passing by is only used this once in Mark’s gospel. As Jesus and the crowd draw near to him, Bartimaeus begins to shout out and say, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” For Bartimaeus, the title obviously indicates that Jesus is God’s designated agent like King David. It introduces the theme that Jesus is a royal figure, related to God’s anointed king over Israel. This becomes more important as Jesus enters Jerusalem to the cries and adulation of the crowd, then goes on trial and is crucified as king of the Jews. This is another place in the gospels where those who are sighted are the ones who are blind, and those who are blind have the clearest sight and perception about Jesus. In the gospels seeing is often equated with understanding. The message within these two passages about sight restoration are not telling us that Jesus has gotten better at this restoration of sight business somewhere between Bethsaida and Jericho. It is not telling us his power to heal has increased. Instead, it is a way of indicating that our gaining of full sight is progressive, full insight about Jesus’ identity will take

some development—some spiritual growth by us and in us as faith increases. Another difference is found within the blind men themselves. The first man, who remains anonymous, is brought to Jesus and others ask Jesus to aid him. We are given more information about this second man. He is named as Bartimaeus, the son of Timaeus. He is a blind beggar. Bartimaeus is not passive in engineering this encounter. When Bartimaeus hears that Jesus of Nazareth is passing by the place where he is sitting doing his begging he calls out to Jesus. Others in the crowd nearby rebuke Bartimaeus, demanding that he be quiet. Their reaction is that a blind beggar has no place to call out to Jesus. This detail shows us that in Mark, faith must overcome obstacles. Faith is not something that comes easily to those folks in Mark's gospel. This detail also demonstrates to us that blind beggars dwell near the bottom rung of social privilege in ancient society. In many ways, the blind and disabled still dwell in that lower position in modern society. The disciples, although in the crowd do not speak up for Bartimaeus. They do not question the crowd which tries to silence his plea for aid. Despite Jesus' instructions that they are to serve the vulnerable they do not recognize this as an opportunity for discipleship. Bartimaeus does not meekly accept the interference of the crowd but begins to cry out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" Bartimaeus knows that Jesus' response of compassion and grace can be relied on. Bartimaeus understands Jesus' compassion and mercy even before Jesus heals him. So Bartimaeus increases his efforts. He is rewarded as Jesus stops and tells the crowd to call him to come. What happens next is interesting. Presumably Jesus could have walked over to Bartimaeus to talk with him. He even could have restored his sight without getting closer. But he doesn't. Instead, he tells those onlookers who have tried to silence Bartimaeus to summon him to come to him. In this manner those who have sought to inhibit the beggar must now assist in Jesus' ministry to him. Another detail here we often overlook in our rush to celebrate the act of healing is Bartimaeus' reaction to Jesus' message summoning him to come. Bartimaeus tosses aside his cloak. He is blind and a beggar, yet he tosses aside his cloak. Obviously, Bartimaeus expects this summons to result in a transformation of his life situation because a blind beggar would need to keep his possessions close at hand. Bartimaeus expects a change in his status. His health problem of blindness and his economic problem that he must beg for his living are a single piece of fabric. Bartimaeus expects these things to change. As with other healings, Jesus can restore Bartimaeus to a place of wholeness, a change that will demand that he be given a place within the society. When Bartimaeus casts off his cloak, he confidently prefigures that he will no longer be sitting on his garment dependent upon handouts from those passing by. When Bartimaeus reaches Jesus, Jesus asks him, "What do you want me to do for you?" Bartimaeus' request is simple—"My teacher, let me see again." He states his need simply and with confidence. Bartimaeus asks for the right thing—something that he needs. It is ironic that his response is to the same question that Jesus asked of James and John when they approached him asking for something in the text we looked at last week. Bartimaeus is seeking no special privileges. Jesus says to him, "Go, your faith has made you well." This again makes the point that Jesus has not come to either gain or bestow power and honor but to open eyes to the new spiritual, social and material realities made possible when God reigns. When it comes to understanding Jesus and what Jesus has come to do, the disciples James and John are more "blind" than Bartimaeus ever was. The connections between seeing and believing are so strong in the Gospel accounts that these miracles worked through Jesus almost always seem more

about growing in faith than taking off dark glasses to physically see. Though Bartimaeus was blind to many things, he clearly saw who Jesus was. Seeing “who Jesus is” is the goal of faith, and it leads to discipleship. Only those who are the “unblind” can see where to follow. And indeed, at the end of this passage we are told that that is exactly what happened with Bartimaeus. Once Bartimaeus regained his sight he went from sitting alongside the road to following Jesus on the way. In Mark’s gospel this healing also represents a calling because the encounter with Jesus leads Bartimaeus to follow Jesus into Jerusalem. Bartimaeus is the last disciple who joins to follow Jesus on the way to the cross. Much of the last portion of Mark’s gospel before the entry into Jerusalem is focused on Jesus’ teaching through actions who he is and what he expects of those who follow him. As the end of the text last week declared those who follow Jesus are to be servants who care for the vulnerable. Jesus’ healing of Bartimaeus is a demonstration of this—it is also provides us another lesson about discipleship. Even above the crowd which tried to silence Bartimaeus Jesus heard. Hearing Jesus stood still and sought to reach out to the one who called. There is a lesson there for us. We need to listen for the cries of the vulnerable, cries which are sometimes hard to hear because of the noise of those who wish to silence them. We are called to hear and to respond. As disciples who follow Jesus we need to see the manner in which we are called to follow by being those who serve. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.