

SEEING AND FOLLOWING

Mark 10:46-52 [MW18-34]

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Mangawhai & Wellsford, Sunday 28 October 2018

A couple was dressed and ready to go out for the evening. They covered their pet parakeet and put the cat in the backyard, then phoned the local taxi company and requested a taxi. The taxi arrived and when the couple opened the front door the cat ran back into the house. They didn't want the cat shut in the house because she always tries to eat the bird. The wife goes out to the taxi while the husband goes inside to get the cat. The cat runs upstairs, the man in hot pursuit. Waiting in the cab, the wife doesn't want the driver to know the house will be empty for the night. She explains to the taxi driver that her husband will be out soon. "He's just going upstairs to say good-bye to my mother." A few minutes later, the husband gets into the cab. "Sorry I took so long," he says as they drive away. "Silly thing was hiding under the bed. Had to poke her with a coat hanger to get her to come out! She tried to take off so I grabbed her by the neck. Then I had to wrap her in a blanket to keep her from scratching me. I carried her downstairs and threw her out into the back yard!" The taxi driver hit a parked car ...

Misunderstandings ...

- throughout Mark's gospel the disciples are often shown to be have grasped the wrong end of the stick
- sometimes they are portrayed like that unfortunate taxi driver don't you get it yet Jesus says as the disciples keep misunderstanding, keep not seeing

Mark further makes his point by telling two blindness/seeing stories

- just a few paragraphs before today's story of Bartimaeus Jesus cures another blind man but in stages
- at first the blind man sees fuzzily, and, squinting he says that people look like trees walking around then Jesus places his hands on him and then the man sees clearly

In recounting this first incident, Mark is clearly insinuating a parallel with the disciples

- they are also blind and their faith in Jesus, like this man's, is coming slowly, in stages in today's second story, however, Bartimaeus sees instantly and Mark seems to be admitting that the disciples are finally getting it
- and what is it they getting?

They are getting that discipleship with Jesus means an upside-down world where the first are last and the last first, where one forgives one's enemies seventy times seven times, where the one who loses his life will save it, where the miserable, chest-striking publican in back of the Temple is more worthy than the triumphant Pharisee in front, where proud fathers run to their wayward sons instead of the other way around, where one gives his coat when only asked for a shirt, where enemies are to be prayed for, good deeds are to be done in secret, and the one who wishes to rule over all must be the servant of all.

Talk about subversive teaching!

- that's a tough Christian mission statement and it's not going to get you very far in a world of greed and me-first
- no wonder the apostles had trouble seeing Jesus and his message and, maybe, if they did see, they didn't want to and pretended to be blind because seeing like Jesus can bring a lot of difficulties

For example there was a woman who spoke up in a business meeting, opposing a policy that the company was considering. When asked why she was so adamantly against this policy, she said simply, "Well, for one thing, I'm a Christian and, the way we look at it, we just don't believe in taking advantage of the weaknesses of people." The next day the boss called her into his office and told her, "You ought not to wear your religion on your sleeve. If it happens again, you might look for another company."

It has been noted that Jesus has many admirers but not many followers

- this woman is a follower
so is Bartimaeus, because the gospel says
"Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus on the way"
- 'on the way' is early Christian code for going all the way sincere discipleship

It is not easy to see right, to stay on the road, to go all the way

- not in a culture that celebrates the 'Self' and does everything to keep us from seeing beyond our own selfish wants and desires
- the fact is that slick advertising, routine violence and examples of greed and exploitation blindside all of us
- eventually we become like Mark's version of the disciples:
slow to understand the message of Jesus Christ, slow to see what he sees
slow to see what the saints have seen

Writer and preacher William J. Bausch remarks:

That's why periodically we need to hear a gospel like today's. We need to enter into it. We need to identify with Bartimaeus, begging on the side of the road. We need to sense that Jesus is passing by in our communion today, in this assembly of yearners and believers. The truth is, if we will admit it, that in some areas of the heart, in some areas of the spirit, like the apostles in Mark, we have misunderstood Jesus and his message, that we have spiritual blind spots.

An example of this is shared by a pastor who recalls an incident from his training:

One day many years ago, as part of my training, I worked at Boston City Hospital as a chaplain's assistant. I was assigned to a prison ward, and one of the prisoners there was a big-time drug dealer. It was my duty to visit him because he was very ill. With the half-hearted pseudo-compassion of the typical do-gooder, I did my duty. Later, I confessed this to the Roman Catholic nun who was my supervisor. I said, 'How can I go and pray with this man who is ruining the life of this city? He deserves his illness and a whole lot more.' Her reply? "Who died and elected you God? Somewhere deep within that man, covered by the layers of pain and denial and every rotten thing he has ever done, there is the kernel of God's image. Your only job is to see that spark; and the only way you can ever see it is to forget everything else about whatever anyone else has told you about right and wrong and believe with your whole heart that the spark is there. He, too, just as much as anyone you will ever meet, is a child of God's love."

That trainee pastor could see, but was blind - Bartimaeus was blind but he could see

- Jesus asked Bartimaeus directly what he wanted
and Bartimaeus said simply he wanted to see
- most of us can only imagine what it would be like to be blind
have no real idea what a difference it would make to be given the gift of sight
but it would be huge

Max Lucado, in his book, "God Came Near," tells the story of Bob Edens: For 51 years Bob Edens was blind. He couldn't see a thing. His world was a black hall of sounds and smells. He felt his way through five decades of darkness. And then, he could see. A skilled surgeon performed a complicated operation and, for the first time, Bob Edens had sight. He found it overwhelming. "I never would have dreamed that yellow is so...yellow," he exclaimed. "I don't have the words. I am amazed by yellow. But red is my favorite color. I just can't believe red. I can see the shape of the moon -- and I like nothing better than seeing a jet plane flying across the sky leaving a vapor trail. And of course, sunrises and sunsets. And at night I look at the stars in the sky and the flashing light. You could never know how wonderful everything is."

After an experience like that

- wouldn't you gratefully, wholeheartedly, unashamedly follow the one who gave this gift???
- Bartimaeus did ... he left everything including his most valuable possession, his cloak, and followed Jesus

I invite you to reflect on this and what it might mean for you

- as we have a video clip of 'The Song of Bartimaeus' by Olukemi Adeniyi

[Video Clip]

Jesus in our service today is calling to us

- "what do you want me to do for you?" he asks and right away we can think of a million things
- but surely a more true, a more reflective response should be that of Bartimaeus: "Lord, I want to see"
- and having seen, follow ...

Mark tells us Bartimaeus followed Jesus on the way

- that way was the road to Jerusalem
a road that would lead to the acclaim of palm-waving crowds
the confrontation at the temple and the last meal with his friends
- it was a road that would lead to arrest, to humiliation, to suffering, to death
and in the end, it would lead to glory
- Bartimaeus followed Jesus on that way
into a life he had never dreamed of when he sat a blind beggar, by the roadside
- Bartimaeus used his sight to follow Jesus on the way to discipleship

May God grant us the grace to seek sight

- the courage to be blind no more
and the perseverance to follow

Amen.