

“Healing our Blindness” Reading: Mark 10:46-52 Proper 25/B 10/27/2024
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The story we just heard stands on its own as a healing story with some specific particular details included in the telling: for example, we’re given the detail that the blind man’s name is Bartimaeus, as though his name might have been known in the early Christian community.

Then there’s the detail that this whole incident begins with this Bartimaeus crying out to Jesus: “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” And when the crowd tells him to quiet down, as though he’s embarrassing them, instead he yells even more loudly “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”

And then, when Jesus calls him to come near we’re given the detail that Bartimaeus throws off his cloak, which you might think a blind beggar wouldn’t want to part with, but perhaps it suggests Bartimaeus’ urgency and trust that what is going to happen with Jesus will radically change his circumstances.

Another interesting details is that this is one of the few times—at least recorded in the gospels—that Jesus asks the question “what do you want me to do for you?” before acting. And then lastly, once the man is healed and he can see, he follows Jesus, we’re told, “on the way.”—perhaps echoing that earliest name of Jesus’ followers as followers of “The Way.”

So—there are a number of interesting details to this particular story of healing to set it apart. But like all the stories of Jesus healing, there is also the sense that Jesus’ healings are signs, revelations of God’s kingdom drawing near, of the healing that God desires for people—all people.

And there’s another significant aspect to this story that we might miss is we don’t read it in the context of the larger narrative that Mark writes. Because the placement of this story is significant—and likely a key to understanding its full meaning.

You have to remember back to the gospel readings of the past weeks from Mark’s gospel to see the careful literary structuring Jesus making his way to Jerusalem and his three predictions—announcements, really—of his impending crucifixion and death.

First, way back in chapter 8, Jesus cures a blind man at Bethsaida. Then came Peter’s declaration and Jesus’ first announcement of his impending death. But, as you’ll remember, Peter doesn’t get it and rebukes Jesus (who in turn rebukes him right back.)

Then, in chapter 9, Jesus repeats his declaration that he will die in Jerusalem, a pronouncement that terrifies his disciples into silence...until, that is, they begin arguing with each other about who is the greatest because, again, they don’t get it. Jesus’ words take time to sink in, and that’s when he put before them a child and told them that leadership and greatness are about welcoming the vulnerable.

Again, in chapter 10, Jesus says once more that he is going to Jerusalem to die. And, again, the disciples don’t get it. First, James and John ask for special places of honor and then the rest of the disciples resent their self-interested pushiness. Jesus’ words still haven’t sunk in and taken hold, so he says as plainly and clearly as possible that to be great is to serve others and that to be first is to be last. And then comes our reading for today, the healing of the blind man, Bartimaeus.

It’s interesting, isn’t it, how this healing of blindness brackets Jesus’ three pronouncements of his impending death, the disciples’ failure to understand, and Jesus ongoing teaching about what constitutes greatness in God’s kingdom?

All of this suggests a blindness beyond physical blindness and a greater need for healing from another kind of blindness and inability to see.

Now as I said, this metaphorical sense—in this case of blindness—is present in all of the stories in the gospels of Jesus healing people. But it may be that this sense of a blindness suggests an unintentional or perhaps even intentional refusal to understand, a kind of living in denial of the truth is something we need to be healed of, something our world needs healing from.

The Christian church has sought to speak to individuals about the call to see clearly—take out the log in your eye before judging the speck in another’s eye—but we have been less good at moving beyond individual morality to recognize and address corporate and structural blindness to injustice, racism, oppression.

And when we do so in the name of separating religion and social and political concerns we are blind—unintentionally and sometimes intentionally— to what are clearly social and political implications in Jesus preaching of the “kingdom of God,” and all his teaching.

Part of commemorating the “Season of Creation” in the New Zealand Book of Prayer, has been to intentionally challenge our blindness to the very real threats to God’s creation, to see our connection with all creatures and to be renewed in our God-given calling to be good stewards to act. It is a message that should have always been part of the church’s proclamation of the gospel of the incarnate God, but has been sadly missing or minimized in our history.

This is the challenge to the church in our time: to speak the truth—in love, yes—but to speak it clearly, naming those difficult truths that we are tempted to deny, exposing illusions of control and dismantling the delusions of endless consumption that enslave us and threaten our children.

And this applies to the blindness regarding all the difficult truths confronting us—the history and ongoing presence of racism, institutionalized injustice, white supremacy, the heresy of Christian nationalism.

In this time of intentional deception on the part of too many political leaders to fan fear and division, as followers of Jesus’ way we must be healed of our blindness and seek to be healers of the blindness of ignorance around us, exposing broken structures, unjust institutions and our common failure to care for the most vulnerable.

And we must have the same urgency of Bartimaeus who shouts to Jesus, throws off his cloak and runs to Jesus to be healed.

I think Mark tells the story the way he does because he knows that Jesus’ words, his teaching, his actions – indeed, his whole life! – were about healing blindness and all our deepest wounds and diseases—as individuals yes, but also in our life together as families, communities, as a nation, and world: to heal us to see clearly and, empowered by his Spirit, to act.