

The Blind Leading the Blind
Luke 18:35-43 and other various NT passages
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My grandparents owned a pharmacy in San Antonio, Texas when my mother was growing up, the kind with not only pills and potions, but sundries and a soda fountain, and all the local characters that went along with such a place. One of those characters was a gentleman by the name of Fred who was blind. Fred had been blind from a very young age, so young that he really didn't have any memories of images. But that did not stop him from enjoying life. In fact, Fred was one of the kindest, gentlest souls you'd ever care to meet, according to the stories my mother tells. They would help him across the street and settle him into his stool at the soda fountain, and simply enjoy his sunny presence. Well, it turns out that one day, something miraculous happened and Fred went into the hospital a blind man and came out able to see. My mother doesn't remember the details of the procedure they performed on him, but she does remember the transformation he underwent. In the course of a few short months upon receiving his sight, Fred went from being the kindest, gentlest of souls you'd ever care to meet to being the kind of bitter and wretched soul you go out of your way to avoid. Perhaps the harsh reality of what he could finally see was too much for his gentle soul to bear.

On the other hand, I have a friend who recently developed serious eye troubles, but it turns out that it is a good thing. After several surgeries, a lot of

unexpected lessons in patience, and hours and hours of keeping his head down and still, now he is beginning to see in a new way, in what might be described as a Spirit-led way, and it is making a difference in the lives of many. He finds his generosity and compassion expanding, his priorities changing, and a greater sense of joy returning to his life. I'm not sure he would say he would do it again, but there is no doubt his eyes have been opened, and that he wouldn't want them shut again. Could it be that there is a link between our eyesight and our ability to see? It would certainly appear so, if these real life stories, and our story tonight from the Gospel of Luke of the blind man healed by Jesus are to be believed.

“What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus said to the blind man who had called out to him from the side of a Jericho road. “What do you want me to do for you?” And the man gave the answer we would certainly expect him to give: “Lord, I want to see.” What else would he say? Who wouldn't want their eyesight returned to them? And yet, is that what he was really asking for? Or was he asking for the ability to see the kingdom that Jesus was bringing? A plain reading of the text would indicate that the man was interested in regaining his eyesight; as we read it in English, there is nothing to suggest a hidden meaning in his words that might indicate that what he really desired to see was God. But that's the blindness of translation, isn't it? There are things we cannot see unless we dig a little deeper into the Greek, and when we do that with tonight's passage we find that the Greek word used for “to receive sight” can also mean “to look up” as when Jesus looks

up to heaven upon the breaking of the bread at the feeding of the five thousand. And so those who first heard this story may have heard it in two ways, may have heard it as more than a miracle story, more than the story of Jesus' great power over the things over which we have no control. They may have heard it as a story of someone whose eyes may have betrayed him, but whose heart does not, someone who understood that there is more to life than what we can see with our two eyes, and that he wants to see that more clearly. And so on both counts, this blind man got exactly what he asked for, for we are told that he both regained his eyesight *and* followed Jesus and glorified God. That wasn't the response of everyone healed by Jesus. Some just went on their way, returning to the lives and families and work. It is not to say that those who resumed their normal lives after being healed by Jesus didn't see God, but it is to say that this guy did, and he began to see the roads stretching on ahead of him, both the one beneath his feet, and the one whose horizon was eternity.

It seems clear that the blind man must have spiritual sight to call upon Jesus the way he does, without seeing him, and only hearing about his exploits. How many other people must have passed by claiming to be faith healers? Countless perhaps, but what we are supposed to understand from this story is that this blind man recognizes Jesus. The placement of this story, in both Luke and in Mark, where the blind man is named as Bartimaeus, illuminates the spiritual blindness of the disciples, those who not only have their eyesight, but who have been first hand

witnesses of all Jesus has said and done, who have seen the unfolding of the kingdom. So here is the blind beggar, sightless and relying on hearsay and rumors, who does not allow the crowd to drown him out, but who insists that Jesus is who he believes him to be, one with the power to overcome his condition which assigns him to the margins of both the road and his society. The blind man sees that people like him are not marginal in Jesus' eyes, but central. This is the insight James and John missed when they sought positions or privilege at Jesus' right and left hands. This is the truth that the exalted Pharisee Nicodemus could not wrap his mind around, that the Spirit blows where it wills, and that it chooses to blow on the mighty and the fallen, the clean and the unclean. This is the reality the woman at the well recognized, that the Spirit can and must be worshiped not only by those considered worthy, but even by Samaritan women considered sinners even by their own community.

The blind beggar seems to exemplify what the Apostle Paul is telling us in our passage from First Corinthians when he is talking about what Christ has revealed to us about God. The part we read, about how “What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived”—the things God has prepared for those who love him—these are the things God has revealed to us by his Spirit,” that is preceded by the reminder that the rulers of the age, those who crucified Christ, apparently could not see, or they wouldn't have crucified him. They may not have seen, but the blind beggar sees, and we must presume that he

sees what they could not because God has placed God's Spirit within him. What does Paul say? "What we have received is not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may understand what God has freely given us." Yes, the blind beggar understands what God had freely given him. What all of our passages tonight suggest is that God has given us the Spirit, and we who recognize it are the ones who truly see. In other words, the Spirit within us recognizes the Spirit in our midst, and so then the blind man must have had the Spirit, even if others would not have believed it. We may not believe that about ourselves, but the Spirit is within us as well. At Pentecost we recall the disciples filled with the Spirit even if others could not believe it, instead choosing to believe they were all drunk at nine o'clock in the morning.

I began tonight with a couple of modern day stories about the relationship between eyesight and what we might call vision, or at least perspective. Sometimes what we can see with our eyes is an obstacle to seeing what God wants us to see. Clearly the solution is not, even as Jesus has suggested, to "pluck out your eye if it causes you to sin," but rather to find a way to put our eyesight in its proper place, to cultivate new ways of seeing that do not depend on whether or not our eyes are functioning. This week, I was catching up on listening to some podcasts of one of my favorite public radio broadcasts, "This American Life," and as if by grace, the first one I listened to began with a story of a blind man's travails when he tried to call home after arriving at his hotel room, and I think his story might speak to how

might live with the reality of our blindness. This blind man's name is Brian and when he arrives at his room and wants to call his wife to tell her he has arrived safely, he can't find the phone where he normally knows it to be, on the nightstand next to the bed. It's always there, right? So he begins feeling around the room, on all the furniture, the beds, the desks, the chairs, the tables, and no telephone. He does it again, sure he just missed something. No phone. So he begins feeling the walls and he goes around the room until he returns to the bed where he began. Still no phone. He checks the bathroom. No phone. Finally he gives up and goes to bed without calling his wife. As you might expect, he is awakened in the morning by the sound of a telephone ringing, and he follows the sound of it and discovers it on a table, a table he is sure he inspected the night before. It is his wife calling. To make a long story short, it turns out that as he went around the room, feeling the walls for a telephone he thought must be hanging there somewhere, he really only felt three walls, because when he returned to the wall next to the bed where he began, he stopped. The problem was that that wall didn't go on as he assumed, to make a square room, but in fact opened up into an alcove with an additional set of furniture, and, of course, the telephone. And this is how Dave summed up his experience. He says, "When you are blind, you just can't assume anything. And the problem is that you get a picture in your mind and if you get it wrong, you just live inside the mistake." "And the problem is that you get a picture in your mind and if you get it wrong, you just live inside the mistake." Isn't that true in our lives, even

with our eyesight? We look at people and we judge them, we relate to people and we project our own anxieties on them, we allow the biases of our culture to condition our perspective of right and wrong, and we get it wrong, and we just live inside the mistake. That's the picture the people on the side of the Jericho road had when the blind beggar called out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me," and they told him to be quiet. They had a picture in their minds, and they got it wrong, and they just lived inside the mistake, and they wanted to keep him there too. But the blind man kept feeling all the way around the room of his life until he found an alcove with a lifeline in it, and he called upon the one who could save him. He could see there was more to his life than met the eye.

Brian went on to talk about his life as a blind man by saying, "It took me a long time to come to understand that blindness actually wasn't the main problem. The main problem was embarrassment. That I had to give myself over to the slapstick of things." The Pentecost story, the Pentecost experience, is a slapstick story. For those of you who might not be familiar with the term slapstick, it refers to a style of comedy involving exaggerated actions which sometimes exceed the boundaries of common sense. Maybe you've seen some of the masters of slapstick like Charlie Chaplin, Laurel and Hardy, the Three Stooges, El Chavo. The thing about slapstick is that you just can't take it too seriously. It is comedy for the sake of comedy, fun for the sake of fun. Maybe there's a message in there somewhere, but that's not the point. The point is to enjoy watching others make fools out of

themselves. And they can do that because they have overcome what blind Brian has identified as the main problem, the embarrassment of it all.

In Jerusalem that first Pentecost, I don't doubt that there were some who were embarrassed by the whole thing, both those with the Spirit and those watching the Spirit take hold. That kind of stuff sometimes exceeds the boundaries of common sense, and it leaves people uncomfortable. But if we are to make our way through our lives as people gradually recovering our ability to see God, we are going to need to be able to live with the embarrassment, to persevere in our discomfort, to keep feeling along that wall even though we think we are going insane. We just can't take ourselves too seriously, or we'll always be too embarrassed to see the kingdom. Our challenge, I think, comes from the blind man's response to seeing Jesus, both with his eyes and with his heart.

"Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus, praising God." That is going to open us up to some embarrassment, to some discomfort. But in that embarrassment, in that discomfort, we'll have eyes to see what's really important in this life and the next, just as the blind beggar did on the road to Jericho. Amen.