

Regaining Sight

An Ordinary Time Sermon by Pastor Rob Hamilton
Delivered on September 19, 2021 in the See All The People Series
My first sermon series in Geneva as Sr. Pastor

Mark 10:46-52 NRSV

46 They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. **47** When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” **48** Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” **49** Jesus stood still and said, “Call him here.” And they called the blind man, saying to him, “Take heart; get up, he is calling you.” **50** So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. **51** Then Jesus said to him, “What do you want me to do for you?” The blind man said to him, “My teacher, let me see again.” **52** Jesus said to him, “Go; your faith has made you well.” Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

Preamble

Hi! I am Rob Hamilton, Senior Pastor here at the United Methodist Church of Geneva. Thank you for joining us as we try to keep up with Jesus in Mark’s 10th chapter. If you are new to the series we have been following Jesus in Mark’s gospel (and a few others) as he looks upon people that we might be invisible to us and the Jesus see then has compassion on them and acts with kindness, grace and mercy. I want to say again we glad you are here today. Our Vimeo page has an archive of where we’ve already been and so if you want to catch up head on over there. As we jump in to today’s story about regaining sight and blind Bartimaeus, I want to invite you to pause for prayer. Will you please pray with me and for me?

Prayer of Illumination

Jesus, like Bartimaeus, we need your mercy for we are blind. We can be so blind we don’t even know what we are blind to anymore. Help us to see. Use this message to open our eyes to whatever it is you would have us see. Speak to me, Jesus, as much as I am speaking to these siblings in Christ so that together we might regain our sight and follow you ever more closely on the way. Amen.

Sermon

If you are one to read ahead on sermon the published sermon texts, then you've probably already noticed that Jesus is on the move in this chapter. For those of you who have never thought to read ahead, that's cool. I got you covered.

In Mark chapter 10, Jesus is on the move. Jesus starts out in Judea the region beyond the Jordan where the Pharisees test Jesus on divorce. He stops for rest in a home where they haggle Jesus more on divorce and the children start coming to Jesus. Then, Jesus sets out from there and is caught a by a rich man wanting to inherit eternal life. Next, Jesus is on his way up to Jerusalem with his disciples and on the road he warns them about his death and resurrection and James and John jockey for position. And when we get to today's story Jesus and his crew are now in Jericho, actually they are leaving Jericho as today's story unfolds. But do you see how much traveling Jesus is doing here. I mean Jesus is like Roy Kent, he's here, there, every where and no matter where Jesus goes crowds gather in a cheer him on.

So this large crowd is getting ready to send Jesus and his disciples off to their next destination blind, begging Bartimaeus is there. Now, this is peculiar. Jesus does tons of miracles in all the gospels. Few of the lucky recipients get named to be remembered for all of history. So one would think Bart, here would be someone of significance. But history spends most of its time speculating on who this blind man is and what his name means, all searching for some historical significances, but nothing is conclusive. But what we do know, is that he doesn't have a first name. Bartimaeus means son of Timaeus. So everyone in this Jericho crowd knows this blind beggar, but no-one cares to know his name. To me to not no someone's name is awkward, but to define them by their disability (blindness) and to identify them by their social class (beggar) that's... dehumanizing.

That's how the crowd treats Bartimaeus. They ignore him. They walk right past him as if he's invisible. And this is probably how Bartimaeus is accustomed to being treated. However this is a large crowd and they're all talking and Bartimaeus is blind, not deaf. He can hear all the hubbub about Jesus. He knows Jesus' reputation to perform miracles. And now Bartimaeus hears that Jesus is going right by him. This is his chance to have his life changed. To be seen and to see. So what does Bartimaeus do? Through his blindness, he can see Jesus for who he really is - the Son of David - something the Disciples were struggling with earlier in the chapter and so he shouts in the direction of the action, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Whoah! The crowd doesn't like this. They don't like this nameless beggar moving out of the realm of being invisible to a place of sight. So the crowd sternly ordered him to be quiet (though I suspect the gag orders were not nearly as polite as Mark records them). But the crowd's actions, just makes Bartimaeus want to be

seen even more so he screams at the top of his lungs, demanding to be seen: “Son of David, have mercy on me!” Jesus stops. He hears blind Bartimaeus. Jesus’s Spirit can see Bartimaeus long before he lays eyes on him. So Jesus orders the man to be seen by the crowd and to have him brought forward.

The crowd now realizes that they can’t pretend to not see Bartimaeus and so they help him forward. Bartimaeus flings off his beggars cloak and hurries to Jesus expecting his life to change and Jesus asks him what he wants, Bartimaeus says with respect that he wants his vision restored (apparently Bartimaeus wasn’t always blind) and so without a touch, spit or mud Jesus declares that Bartimaeus’ faith has made him well. And sure enough Bartimaeus has his sight return and instead of running off and enjoying this new found life, the mercy he experiences in Jesus, causes him to leave this town that would never see him for who he was and instead Bartimaeus chooses to follow Jesus on the way.

This is a powerful and amazing story of healing. Its also a story about the power of being seen and how when one encounters the transforming power of Jesus, that one often is willing to drop everything and follow him. This is story of good news on how Jesus has mercy on us and can heal us so that we can follow him.

I think this is also a story about the crowd and human nature and how day and day out we filter people out of our vision. This is also a story about how its easier to neglect a name in order to support our dehumanizing, self-preservation mechanisms and its a story about how Jesus can stop those in the crowd to help those with vision to regain sight indoor to actually see and acknowledge those we prefer not to see and learn to follow Jesus on the way much more faithfully.

Let me share with you one such way Jesus has caught me in the crowd and is helping me to regain sight. 10 years ago shortly we moved into Pepper Valley when I was your Associate Pastor, when I had the chance to meet the Rev. Chris Pierson. Pastor Chris a distinguished colleague about 20 years my senior. He was asking about my adjustment to Geneva and we talked about the different places to eat out and shop and then he told me about the time he was stopped and frisked by police while driving through Geneva after meeting a friend for dinner - a classic case of driving while black. Oh yeah, Pastor Chris is a black man.

This seemed so out of place to me. Geneva is a nice town, with nice people. And racial profiling is so uncool... after all its the 21st Century and to me such bias was thing of the past. Chris told me that before moving Annual Conference meeting to Pheasant Run, he, the bishop and other church leaders had to meet with the area mayors and police to see if they’d be welcoming of the hundreds people of color who would be descending upon their restaurants during the 4-day conference and that to send the message that sundowning wouldn’t be tolerated and if

necessary that we'd take our 1000 person meeting to other communities and they'd benefit from the additional revenue of the 4-day event.

I'll tell you, I was in shock! I thought the civil rights movement ended discrimination and that racism was just isolated to a few fringe groups or individuals. I had never seen or considered systemic and institutional racism because I was blinded by my own privilege. My pale skin color gave me a free pass that I didn't sign up for and in hearing Pastor Chris' experience I didn't want this privilege, if you can call it that. And as I am learning, people of color get a target - not a pass- they didn't sign up for either.

I'll be honest, up until that day with Pastor Chris I was blind. I thought and was taught to be colorblind, to not judge people based on their skin tone but by the content of their character, but all that nice teaching really did was blind me to the inequality and injustice in all of our systems and institutions that negatively impacts people of color that still exist to this day. And so in my blindness, I dismissively thought that all the plight I'd hear about on the news were simply isolated incidents filled with bad actors in the drama of life.

Pastor Chris lovingly shared his experience and Jesus helped me start to see color again, but at first, the shame I felt for being so blind felt like wearing a beggars cloak, or like I was branded with the scarlet letter of R for racist for the whole world to see, as I naively thought racism was a thing of the past as I moved upon this earth, blinded by my own privilege.

So for as much as we can rejoice in this text at the power of God to heal blind Bartimaeus, we also must face the possibility of conviction that we might be in the crowd, blinded by our sin. We can be spiritually blind to any number of sins, and the minute we think we're not sinning. It's in that moment, we have secured our place in the crowd as a seeing person needing Jesus to help us regain sight.

So for me, right now, if I think I'm super woke. If I think I am not color blind. If I don't think I have some part in the racial tensions, inequality and injustice people of color experience on a daily basis, even if I'm a nice person, good pastor and treat people equally... then I really am blind.

Now, I'll also admit that I am pretty occupied struggling with my own blindness to suggest what anyone else here today might be blind to or if they are blind at all. But, I can tell you, if you find yourself putting up a defense on something or some issue in your life, then maybe God is using this story to press on you to call out to Jesus for mercy in order to regain your sight. Just like Jesus is working on healing my sight on race right now.

No matter what it might be, are we willing to regain sight? Are we willing to admit we are blind and need help seeing? Are we willing to do the hard and uncomfortable work of letting our sin -whatever it is- come to the forefront in order to gain sight/life? If so, then Jesus offers us healing.

I think this whole dramatic story of Bartimaeus' physical blindness and the crowd's spiritual blindness shows us that with God's help people really can change. By hearing, believing and calling out to Jesus - the blind so see; liars speak the truth; cheaters discover fidelity; the addicted get sober; racists become allies; the lost get found; the broken are healed, abusers get reconciled; the dead come to life; the darkness comes to light.

So whatever God might be pointing out to you right now, I invite you to own it. Take responsibility. Repent and then come to Jesus for healing. For in regaining your sight, Jesus sends us into the world to help us all see the Light of the World that is our Lord and savior Jesus Christ and to start living the life that is truly life. May it be so for the Glory of HIS name. Amen.