

The Blind Leading the Blind

Mark 10:46-51

Caroline M. Kelly
Central Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, Georgia

In the Declaration of Independence, the framers claimed that there were self-evident truths – principles that all people could affirm—among them “that all [people] are created equal and that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, among these being Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.”

While these principles may sound self-evident, their meaning may differ depending on your circumstances. How do you view life if you’ve been paralyzed in a car accident? How do you view liberty if you’ve spent most of your life seeing the world through the bars of a prison door? How do you view the pursuit of happiness if you roam the streets of Atlanta searching for your next fix? The way we see the world depends on who teaches us to see it.

In today’s gospel story, our teacher is Bartimaeus, a blind beggar. He is sitting on the side of the road on the outskirts of Jericho when Jesus and his disciples approach. Jesus has been teaching the disciples about God’s vision of the world and his role in bringing it about, but repeatedly, they demonstrate their inability to see it. They are coming to the end of their relationship as master and apprentices, but the disciples still have so much more to learn.

On the other hand, Bartimaeus seems to “see” it right away. As soon as he hears that Jesus is making his way down the road, he calls out to him, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” By calling him the Son of David, Bartimaeus makes the radical claim that Jesus is the expected deliverer, the Messiah sent by God to liberate the people of God. Even though he is right on, the crowd gathering around Jesus dismisses him altogether. “Look at that pitiful man begging by the road side. What right does he have to speak to the great teacher?” But Bartimaeus is not hindered by their attempts to silence him, persisting loudly with his petition, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” Despite his fringe existence, he knows who this Jesus really is and trusts in his power to bring about restoration.

Peter, too, had called Jesus the Messiah when confronted by Jesus with the question “Who do you say that I am?” But Peter’s actions, like the rest of his comrades, betray his claim. For when Jesus begins to interpret for him what it means to be the Messiah, about his suffering and death, Peter chastises him. Despite their long journey with Jesus and their numerous opportunities to learn from his teachings and interactions with people from all walks of life, the disciples fail to “see” who Jesus is or what he will encounter in Jerusalem. The way we “see” the world depends on who teaches us to “see” it. At this point, the disciples seem incapable of learning.

They are blind to Jesus’ true identity and path because they are using the familiar lenses of their culture to see him – a culture that is highly stratified, in which women are not important enough even to name, children are the lowest of the low, and people with physical and mental disabilities are either bound in shackles or isolated into separate colonies outside the city gates, or are left to beg for existence by the side of the road. So naturally, they cannot see why the promised Messiah will suffer and

die. From their perspective, the Messiah would be a powerful ruler who occupies the highest position in society. And when asked by Jesus, that's exactly where the disciples want to be too—in positions of power and status.

Earlier in the story, Jesus had asked two of the disciples, James and John, "What do you want me to do for you?" In response, they ask to be granted places of honor at his right and left when he comes into his rightful place. Barbara Brown Taylor describes their understanding of how the world operates this way: They seem to believe that the new world will be set up just like the old world only with new leadership in place. The bad guys at the head table will be removed, their chairs will be fumigated, and God's new crew will be seated, with Jesus in the number one position and the most loyal members of his campaign staff on either side of him.¹

Unlike Bartimaeus, who asks Jesus to use his power to heal and restore him, James and John ask Jesus to use his power to grant them privilege. Through Bartimaeus, a seemingly-blind man, Mark opens our eyes to the real Jesus and the true meaning of discipleship. When Jesus tells the disciples to call Bartimaeus to him, he comes without hesitation, throwing off his cloak and springing to his feet to face Jesus. "What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asks. "Let me see again," Bartimaeus replies. And so he does. In a real way, even before his eyes functioned properly, he still saw with far better vision than the sighted disciples.

Bartimaeus' healing is no small thing, but the text does not focus our attention there for long. It quickly moves to the next milestone in Jesus' journey with Bartimaeus right there with him. Phyllis Kersten says,

It's not by accident Mark chooses to end the story by telling us that, after Bartimaeus regained his sight, he followed Jesus "on the way." The next scene in Mark's Gospel is Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, but we know that to follow Jesus "on the way" primarily means to follow Jesus on the way to the cross. In Acts, the first name given to members of the early church was not "Christians" but "people of the Way." With this code language, Mark clearly identifies Bartimaeus as a disciple of Jesus.²

So Bartimaeus, this formerly blind and discarded man, joins the procession, now leading the still stumbling and figuratively blind disciples.

The world looks different depending on who teaches you to see it. Just ask Bartimaeus.

Notes

1 Barbara Brown Taylor, *Bread of Angels* (Boston, Mass.: Cowley Productions, 1997), 43.

2 Phyllis Kersten, "Living by the Word: Reflections on the Lectionary," *The Christian Century* (October 20, 2009): 20.