



Seeing in Faith

Mark 10:46-52

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While it's often said that no one is from Green Valley, no one was born and raised here, that's not quite accurate. There are a few folks who are locals. They see things differently from us transplants. In fact, several of them I've talked with can't for the life of them see the elephant part of Elephant Head. To them, it's a mountain, and that's it. It's those of us who've shown up later who can pick out the details – the ears and the trunk and stuff. It's amazing what you don't see once you're used to things; missing the trees for the forest, the amazing cloud formation that looks exactly like Richard Nixon – you only notice when someone draws your attention to it.

Today's lesson might be easy to skip over, too. Jesus does lots of healings, and he restores sight to several people just in the short Gospel of Mark. And this passage is quite short, too. It could be very easy to pass on it, to say "Oh, yeah, I know that one, I've seen that before." That would be a mistake. It's been very carefully crafted, and it's worth looking at more closely.

First, Bartimaeus becomes the last person Jesus calls in Mark. It isn't obvious, but after he's healed, he "follows Jesus on the way" – "the way" being New Testament shorthand for being a disciple. Not one of the twelve, mind you, but still a disciple. Second, unlike the other miracles we've been following, Jesus doesn't tell Bartimaeus to keep his healing secret. Third, he's the only person to address Jesus as "Son of David." Fourth, Bartimaeus abandons his cloak as he heads for Jesus: this is very surprising, since a beggar used his cloak as a landing zone for the money people tossed him, like people nowadays use a hat, or a can, or a guitar case. Whatever he'd collected that day so far got left behind with that cloak.

That's the pivot point of this story, where before becomes after. That's where Bartimaeus trades his life as a beggar for life as a follower of Jesus. Given all these things together, we have a mini-history of a conversion: Bartimaeus knows that he is not just in need of healing, but mercy. He seeks that mercy through Jesus, and is so confident of receiving it that he leaves his old life behind. And, receiving that mercy, Bartimaeus sees the world for the first time, and follows Jesus.

Now the two previous encounters in this chapter show two other outcomes. The first was the rich man, who even though Jesus called him, could not leave behind his possessions, unlike Bartimaeus, and did not follow Jesus. The second was when the two brothers, James and John, who were already followers, who'd already left their previous lives behind, asked Jesus to make them his deputies, his right- and left-hand men in the Kingdom. Jesus asked them the same question he here asks Bartimaeus: "What do you want me to do for you?" The difference is, James and John were maneuvering for power, to be elevated above the rest; B. wants to see, just to be like everyone else. Jesus can't give James and John what they ask; but he can give a humble man sight. James and John came to Jesus feeling important; Bartimaeus is simply grateful. That's an awful lot in a few verses, isn't it?

If we look at the world around us with the eyes of faith, faith springing from gratitude at all that God has given us, we see things differently, too. We're followers of Jesus, but we don't always see clearly. We need to put on our faith glasses. When we do, we see things that others don't. If we look, we can see beneath the surface to what God is doing around us.

Right after Desert Storm, I was on a destroyer tender, a Navy ship that's basically a floating workshop, standing ready to work on ships needing repair thousands of miles away from American shipyards. We had a crew of a couple hundred sailors who ran the ship, and a thousand others who worked in the various repair shops: ones for electronics, for metal work of all kinds, for weapons, for issues with nuclear reactors, even ones that sewed canvas! We spend a good deal of time in port, but not every ship that we worked on needed all our people. An idle sailor is not a good thing, so as chaplain, I set about looking for some project they could do ashore for the local community.

In Isa Town, Bahrain, there was a place called the "Home for Developmentally Disabled Children." It was full of kids, and it was in poor shape. The awnings that shielded the windows had worn out; the air conditioners were mostly broken, even the water fountains didn't work. They had lots of things that needed to be fixed; we had a few hundred sailors with some very useful skills who needed something to do. We got the two groups together, along with a whole bunch of volunteers to just come and play with the children, who didn't get much outside attention. It was great.

Now, there was a woodshop on this ship, too. And there was a grizzled petty officer third class who worked there, a real piece of work. Let's call him Jones. He'd been promoted and demoted several times; he was borderline disrespectful at all times; he kept his distance from me. You could count on Jones to get in trouble in any and every port. He was also covered in tattoos, and this back before tattoos were fashionable!

Anyway, after we'd been working at the Home for a while, Jones came up to me and said, "Chaplain, I made a few things for the kids. Can I take them over?"

A bit surprised, I said, "Sure. Go on ahead." So he did, and when I got there a bit later, what I found was a complete, handmade, wooden playground. This mean, disrespectful, sailor had built swings, rocking horses, even a teeter totter with backs and arms and a strap on its seats so that the children couldn't fall off it – all out of scrap

lumber he'd scrounged from the shop and the pier.--for these children. I would never have guessed that Jones would ever do *anything* for *anybody* – but here it was.

But that wasn't all. As soon as the children came out, they just mobbed him. This was a guy you'd cross the street to avoid, who'd fight someone who touched him; the kids loved him – and you could see in an instant – he loved them, too. They wanted to touch and see his tattoos; no problem. Piggyback rides? No problem.

Those children – children with physical and mental and developmental disabilities – saw a whole different Jones than I or anyone else ever saw. The rest of us saw a tough guy: we'd seen tough guys before, so we knew what they looked like. We saw an angry, disrespectful disciplinary problem, because that's what he looked like. But now I saw him again for the first time – the way the kids saw him. I'd put on my faith glasses.

What those children saw was someone who cared more about them than he could possibly say – probably more than he cared for himself. They didn't see what he'd been: they saw what he was right then. They couldn't see what he tried to look like to us, to push us away, for whatever reason. While he was with those children, he was an entirely different person. I think that those kids saw in him what Jesus sees in us.

What do you see when you look around you here at Valley Presbyterian Church? The same folks you see every week? The same beautiful building, the same mountains? Owls?

Go back in time for a moment. Think – as best you can – like a young child. What would you see if you walked into this church for the first time, on a Sunday morning? A huge room? Those big beams? The lights? Maybe the crowd of people would be the first thing to register. You'd see the people; people like Grandma, Grandpa – people who are kind? Are you scared? Excited? Happy and comfortable?

We're used to big buildings now, and most of us are used to this one. We're used to crowds, and this crowd. But now, just put on those faith glasses. What do you see? Look! Compassion, transformation, faith in the face of tragedy and loss, selfless dedication, caring. Love. Put on those glasses, like John Dunham does every day. See with the eyes of faith, looking for what Jesus sees in us, what the kids saw in Jones, what Bartemaeus saw in Jesus. Take a good look at the masterpiece of God's handiwork sitting next to you.

And give thanks.