

**October 27, 2024**  
**“See(n)”**  
**Psalm 34:1-8 / Mark 10:46-52**  
**Pastor Tim**

Hellen Keller once wrote, “The most pathetic person in the world is someone who has sight but no vision.”

You may know that Hellen Keller, the American author, disability rights advocate and political activist, lost both her sight and hearing after an illness when she was 19 months old.

She went on to become the first deafblind person in the United States to earn a Bachelor of Arts degree. She wrote more than a dozen books, and spent her adult life—into her late 80s—organizing for disability rights, woman’s suffrage, labor rights and world peace. She was a member of the Socialist Party of America, which she joined in 1909, and in 1920, a founding member of the American Civil Liberties Union.

Hellen Keller had no sight, but plenty of vision.

“Let me see again.” Let me SEE again. This is what Bartimaeus, the blind man, the blind beggar sitting by the roadside, says in our gospel reading this morning. In response to a question from Jesus: “What do you want me to do for you?”

I mean, of course that’s what Bartimaeus would say, right? Of course anyone who is blind would want nothing more than to regain their sight.

Except that part of the beauty of this story, this intimate exchange between Bartimaeus and Jesus, is that Jesus makes no such assumption.

He and the disciples have just arrived in Jericho, we’re told. That’s about 20 miles northeast of Jerusalem, into which Jesus is about to make his triumphal entry. The entry we celebrate every year on Palm Sunday.

The same basic story is found in all three synoptic gospels, but Bartimaeus—literally son of Timaeus—is only named in Mark. In Matthew there are two unidentified blind beggars, and in Luke, just one.

The author of Mark's gospel wants us to remember Bartimaeus. Remember his name.

Bartimaeus, begging as he is for his livelihood, is likely taking advantage—or at least trying to—of the crowds of people heading to and from Jerusalem in observance of the Passover. All three accounts note the large size of the crowd gathered around Jesus and his disciples.

When Bartimaeus hears that it's Jesus, he cries out from the side of the road: "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" The same is true of the nameless blind men in Matthew and Luke. He cries out, he shouts—presumably to be heard among the noise of the crowds.

And Bartimaeus is heard, at least by some, but told to shut up. To be quiet. Bartimaeus is literally the blind man in the story, but it's the crowd that's blind. They have sight, but no vision.

It's the crowd that can't see Bartimaeus. That won't see him. That UNSEES him. That renders him invisible.

As Debie Thomas notes, "To their seeing eyes, the blind man by the roadside is invisible, and therefore expendable. His shouts and cries are not worthy of attention. His suffering is not important enough to warrant tenderness, patience, or even curiosity. When the invisible one dares to speak out, the only efficient and reasonable thing to do is to shut him up. The only priority is to restore order, re-establish the social hierarchy, and maintain a status quo that keeps the privileged comfortable."

"But that comfort," she goes on, "is precisely what Jesus renders impossible."

We might assume that Bartimaeus is used to such a response from passersby. How many beggars on the roadside, on the sidewalks, in the middle of the street, at the traffic light, are so often rendered invisible by so many of us? Rebuked. Ignored. Unseen.

But Bartimaeus cries out even more loudly. Remember his name.

And this time, Jesus hears him. He stops. He stops what he's doing. His eyes are squarely fixed on Jerusalem, but Jesus stops. In the midst of the crowds, he stands still.

And he calls the man to him. He SEES him in a way that no one else does.

And presumably the same people who had just told Bartimaeus to be quiet now approach him with compassion: "Take heart; get up, he is calling you." Jesus forces them to see Bartimaeus in a way they previously would not.

They who have sight have also been given vision. Made to see with new eyes and new hearts.

Bartimaeus throws off his cloak; no small detail, and no small thing given that we can presume that it's literally all he has. The cloak he uses to keep himself warm and secure. The cloak he spreads out on the ground every day to collect coins from passersby.

The cloak is his comfort and his livelihood, but the blind man throws it off. And doesn't just get up, but SPRINGS up. And feels his way through the crowds to meet Jesus.

And then comes Jesus' question. The question that is at the very heart of the story. He can SEE that Bartimaeus is blind, but he doesn't assume that sight is what he wants. He asks him what he wants: "What do you want me to do for you?"

The question assumes the very posture of service. The service Jesus emphasizes in his exchange with his disciples immediately preceding this story. The exchange we explored last week, where the brothers James and John ask Jesus to grant them to sit at his right and left hands, in his glory.

If you were with us last week, you'll recall that Jesus asks them the exact same question he asks of Bartimaeus: "What is it you want me to do for you?"

And you'll recall Jesus' response: "... but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be servant of all."

Jesus models service, and he does so again in his question to Bartimaeus. He doesn't presume to know what Bartimaeus wants or needs.

As Debie Thomas also notes, "He doesn't reduce Bartimaeus to his blindness. Instead, he honors the fullness and complexity of a real human being who likely has many desires,

many longings, and many needs. In asking the question, Jesus invites Bartimaeus into the honest self-reflection essential to growth and healing.”

What do you want? What do you need? What do you long for?

These are questions, she suggests, that are at once both “lovely” and “terrifying.” They call “for radical honesty. Radical vulnerability. Radical trust.”

In asking the question, Jesus enters into relationship with Bartimaeus. He SEES him. And yes, he does heal him. The blind beggar, Bartimaeus, does, in fact, want to see again. And as the story goes, he DOES, in fact, see again.

But this healing story isn't so much about Jesus. It's about the power of mutuality and compassion.

It's about the crowd, AFTER being made to stop and SEE Bartimaeus, the blind beggar, for the first time.

Debie Thomas again: “I don't know this for sure, but I suspect that Jesus heals the crowd FIRST so that they can, in turn, participate in Bartimaeus's healing. What the blind man needs is not physical sight alone; he also needs visibility and validation within his community. In this DOUBLE miracle story, Jesus grants him both.”

Christy Sharshel puts it this way, in poetic form:

*Every day, someone looks at me  
With conditioned eyes  
Making wild guess judgments  
About the length of my hair,  
The color of my skin  
The maker of my shoes  
Never knowing what is real  
Or who I really am*

*Once, someone looked at me  
Through a compassionate heart  
And all that was invisible  
Was revealed in the light of it  
Pain, fear, love, hope  
Fresh wounds and old scars  
Longing and aspiration*

*And my own heart smiled  
Under that gentle gaze  
In the clarity of both seeing  
And being truly seen*

Seeing and being seen. Being seen and seeing.

Of course, this healing story is mostly about Bartimaeus. Remember his name.

“Go, your faith has made you well,” Jesus says to him. Bartimaeus, in boldly shouting over the crowds’ noise and even the crowds’ objections, participates with Jesus in his own healing. In insisting that he be heard and seen, he believes in possibility where no one else does. And not only is he SEEN, but is himself able to SEE again.

His faith, as much as Jesus, makes his healing possible. Makes him well. And that same faith compels him to immediately follow Jesus on the way. On the Way. Throwing off his cloak to follow him, like Peter and Andrew, James and John, had previously dropped their fishing nets.

Bartimaeus now sees with his eyes, and with his life, what is possible.

Now, as with any healing story, we have to proceed with caution. As we’ve been reflecting in recent weeks through the story of Job’s suffering, it is easy – and typical in Christian tradition – to read a healing story like this and simply conclude that in order to be healed, in order to get what we want, what we need, what we long for, all we have to do is have faith that we can and will. All we have to do is believe.

And so, if we DON’T experience healing in the way we want, need, long for, we further conclude that it can only be because we don’t have ENOUGH faith. Or we don’t believe strongly enough. We don’t pray hard enough.

But that’s just not how it works. Healing stories like this are powerfully inspiring and hopeful, but also incredibly—and theologically—dangerous.

We ascribe to Jesus, and so to God, the power to heal. I do and would not argue that claim. I do and would not argue with the faith-claim in Matthew’s gospel that “with God all things are possible.”

I have no reason to believe that healing stories like this didn't actually happen. Don't actually happen.

We in the church tend to assume and ascribe Divine power, omnipotence, as POWER-OVER: the power of will and might and even violent force to conquer anything and everything that gets in our way.

In truth—as the German theologian, Dorothee Sölle, long asserted, and as I know in my experience, and I trust in yours—the power of God, as reflected in the power of Jesus, is really POWER-WITH: the almighty power of love to be WITH us, to accompany us, through anything and everything that comes our individual and collective way.

Sometimes healing looks like the miracle it was for Bartimaeus. And sometimes it doesn't. That's life. There is no why, only mystery. Just ask Job.

But always, always, ALWAYS, power in the Way of Jesus, in the Spirit of God, healing in the Way of Jesus, in the Spirit of God, looks like love that helps us SEE and BE SEEN BY each other.

“To see and to be seen,” writes Brené Brown, “that is the truest nature of love.”

Love that journeys with us all through both wilderness and promised land.

Love that binds us together in an ever-interconnected tapestry with each other and with all of Creation. Whether we realize it or not.

Love that bids us remember each other's pain and suffering as if it were our own.

Love that calls us to help carry each other's burdens because we can't carry them alone.

Love that keeps us connected to love, IN love for God, for our neighbors as for ourselves, for our enemies as for ourselves, even when we don't see the healing we want, need, long for. What we ask for?

Jesus says, keep being honest when I ask: “What do you want me to do for you?” In relationship, with me and with God and with each other, be radically honest. Vulnerable.

Have faith in, believe, trust with every fiber of your being, in the power—the POWER-WITH—of love to heal and make well.

Debie Thomas, whom I've been quoting throughout this sermon, acknowledges her own struggle, her own ambivalence, with healing stories like this one with Bartimaeus.

She writes that her teenage son was in a bike accident that led to recurring headaches. Severe headaches that have kept him out of school for more than a year. That have largely confined him to “darkened rooms with ice packs on his forehead” while they try desperately to figure out how to relieve his suffering and get him back to his life.

What she wants, what he needs, of course, is for the headaches to stop. For his suffering to come to an end. We all know what it is to long for such healing for our own minds, bodies, spirits. For our own lives. For those we love. For so many people and places around the world.

And so she writes, “I don't know what to do with the fact that Jesus sometimes heals ‘immediately’ in the Gospel stories. I wish he would heal my son immediately. But for now, I know what to do with my desire. I cry it out to Jesus. I sit by the roadside, hear the crowds, and cry my longing into the air as loudly and insistently as I can. I do this because I believe Jesus wants me to. I do it because the question he asks is an essential one, and I need it hear it and answer it over and over again to keep my soul alive and kicking: ‘What do you want me to do for you?’ ‘What do you want me to do for you?’ ‘WHAT DO YOU WANT ME TO DO FOR YOU?’ In his compassion, Jesus will not stop asking. And in my need, I will not stop telling him.”

To see and be seen, held always in and by Divine love, we pray.

May it be so.