

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.

There is a question that plagues me when I travel – how do the locals know, with just one glance, that I am a tourist? When I was in Paris, I figured it out quickly...I wore colors and everyone who lives there wore black. In Armenia, well, that one wasn't hard, I obviously don't look Armenian. But even in the US, the question has plagued me. For example, New York City. I've been blessed to go twice. The first time, I was full tourist, gaping at the buildings, watching the movements of traffic with amazement. It was clear to anyone that I wasn't from around there. On my last trip, since I was only there for a day, I was traveling light. I was dressed business casual, had only my purse, I wore black, I didn't see that I looked any different than most every New Yorker I passed. Yet, I was still getting targeted by people wanting to sell me something or book me on a bus tour. I tried NOT looking at the buildings, not taking out my phone to snap photos...it didn't work. I tried walking faster, looking like I was late for an important meeting...it didn't work. Then, slowly, I started figuring it out...it's all about the eyes and what they look at. It finally dawned on me that as I looked at people, the only ones that looked back were those who wanted to sell me something or beg something from me. No one else looks at anyone. Tourists look. People needing something look. No one else looks.

I'm thinking I figured it out and would be free of harassment the rest of the trip, but my eyes kept betraying me. They were curious to soak it all in, it was all so new to me. At one point, trying to avoid eye contact, I simply glanced at a sign someone was holding...he noticed...that's all it took. How can he know just because I glanced at his sign, I thought...then I realized that a true New Yorker is blind to those signs...they've seen them so often they no longer need to look at them.

We often get so used to things that we become blind to them. It is how we come to accept injustice and evil and despair and suffering...they become so ingrained in our surroundings that they become part of the landscape. Once they are part of the landscape, we are no longer bothered by their presence. We can walk right by and not even notice it...until it annoys us by shouting to be noticed.

Pastor Jim mentioned earlier the American Disabilities Act, which we wouldn't have had people who are differently abled not shouted to be noticed. When Congress was being pushed to consider the bill, they heard heart wrenching testimony:

- Like the young woman who has cerebral palsy and was denied entry into a local movie theater because of her disability.
- A Viet Nam vet who had been paralyzed during the war and came home using a wheelchair testified that when he got home, he couldn't get out of his housing project, or on the bus, or off the curb because of inaccessibility, and couldn't get a job because of discrimination. He said he realized he had fought for everyone but himself
- A woman testified that when she lost her breast to cancer, she also lost her job and could not find another one as a person with a history of cancer.
- Parents whose small child had died of AIDS testified about how they couldn't find any undertaker that would bury their child.

Advocates for action organized a "Capital Crawl" in which people with disabilities literally crawled up the 78 marble steps that lead to the entrance of the Capital as a way to bring awareness to the many barriers that existed for people with disabilities. They had to make enough noise to be noticed before change could come. Kind of like Bartimaeus.

"Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" I wonder, of those who heard Bartimaeus that day, how many of them had seen him before he shouted? How many of them had walked by him every day and never looked him in the eye...never considered what life must be like for him...never wondered if there was something he wanted or needed? How many of them had forgotten he even existed, until that shout...that plea to be seen...and to see.

If we isolate this story, we might see it as just an example of the power of Jesus to heal and restore. It is that kind of story...BUT...there is more to it than we might think. The Gospels are not simply random stories written down as isolated events. Each Gospel writer has something they want us to know about the bigger picture of who Jesus is. The stories typically are linked in theme. If we look at the 10th chapter of Mark's gospel, we see clues that help us understand Bartimaeus's story.

Last week the United Women of Faith used Mark 10 to tell the story of parents bringing children to Jesus to be blessed and the disciples trying to run them off, but Jesus welcomed them and said, bring them, the kingdom is made for those such as these. In the next story, a rich young man comes and asks how to get to heaven and Jesus says, be obedient, and he says, "I have," and Jesus says, then sell all you own and give it to the poor...and the man walks away, sad.

Jesus makes clear that those who are considered small, unimportant, poor, marginalized...should be welcomed and served. They should be noticed and empowered. They should be blessed and included. Yet in the very next story, Jesus' disciples begin to argue about who among them is greatest...who will be first...who will be honored. They don't get it...even after being scolded for turning children away...even after hearing that Jesus expects us to use our resources to help lift others up...they are still trying to climb to the top...they can't see.

They can't see Bartimaeus either. They are probably still ill with each other from the "who is greatest" argument. All they know is a person who they look at as being less than, is shouting at Jesus and being annoying. So, they try to silence him. They don't want to look and see someone else they should welcome, or help, or lift up, or love. "Just be quiet and let us be," they think.

But Jesus sees. He sees Bartimaeus, but he also sees his disciples and how they respond to the blind man. And then, Jesus does something extraordinary. Not only does he invite Bartimaeus to come but he asks, "What do you want me to do for you?" It is such a beautiful question. It is a question that offers dignity to Bartimaeus. How often do we look at someone and perceive or assume their need rather than asking them what they need? A colleague of mine running a distribution site for Hurricane relief tells awful stories of things that were "donated" to their site, things that people was sure hurricane victims needed. Like one box filled with used high heel and platform shoes. Or another box including a case of expired food. We assume we can send anything rather than asking someone, what do you need. Jesus asks, what do you need and Bartimaeus has a simple answer...Let me see. And Jesus says, faith helps you do that...helps you see what you couldn't before. Faith helps us to see that all people matter, all people are welcome, all people should be empowered, all resources can be shared. Faith helps us to see what we might otherwise ignore or refuse to look at...the faces of those who need something. If we ignore them...refuse to look at them...we won't feel obligated to do anything about their needs...but Jesus is the one who helps us to see and to respond.

This is a story about Jesus healing, but I think the bigger healing moment is not in the restoration of Bartimaeus' eyesight, it is in the ability of the followers of Jesus to be healed of their blindness. The restorative moment is when everyone sees as Jesus sees. Because when we can do that, we will clearly see truth, and injustice, and oppression, and poverty, and the needy among us. We will clearly see the opportunities to combat misinformation, to fight for justice, to liberate, empower and serve. But we can't do any of that if we remain blind...refuse to look.

It makes me think of that old gospel song, This World is Not My Home, I'm just a'passing through. Maybe we Christians are supposed to look like tourists. Maybe we are supposed to stand out as "not from around here." Maybe making eye contact, seeing –

really seeing – those around us, is vitally important to being a follower of Jesus. Maybe, we are the ones needing to be healed.