

Twenty-Second Sunday After Pentecost – Keli Totton

Job 42:1-6, 10-17; Psalm 34:1-8, 19-22; Hebrews 7:23-28; Mark 10:46-52

I love random facts, so I thought I would start off today with one. According to the Vision Council of America, approximately 75% of Americans use some sort of vision correction. While I am still young—and my parents assure me there is still plenty of time—I am among the elite 25% without glasses or contacts. This statistic holds true in my nuclear family. My mom, dad, and brother all wear corrective lenses, but I do not. Out of those who need vision correction 64% of them choose to wear glasses. Around fourth grade, several of my friends started getting glasses, and while some kids thought they were nerdy or weird, I thought glasses were so cool. I wanted them too! (In retrospect, I'm not really sure why I wanted them—probably because I thought that they would make me look smarter.) Since I couldn't have my own pair, and this was long before the days of hipster glasses with non-prescription lenses, I would just try on my friends' glasses. However, my eyes were not suited for their glasses. When I put them on I saw things differently. The world around me became slanted, fuzzy, or just a complete blur depending on what kind of lens I was looking through.

How often does our faith become like a lens in a pair of glasses that is not meant for us? It can distort how we view ourselves, others, and God, or keep us from seeing the truth at all. Today's Gospel message talks about a physical deficiency of sight on the surface, but when examined more closely, it describes the spiritual blindness that we all suffer from. Let's take a closer look at the lesson from Mark.

Our Gospel passage today starts with Jesus entering Jericho, the last major city before His triumphal entry into Jerusalem. We see that Mark has begun describing Jesus' actions and attitudes in more explicit reference to the upcoming Passion narrative. This pericope introduces readers to the blind beggar Bartimaeus who was sitting on the roadside, probably hoping to collect alms from the pilgrims on the road to Jerusalem for Passover. Perhaps this crowd was also just following Jesus. His fame had spread and many were curious about this radical teacher. Regardless, the crowd would have been murmuring about the teacher in their midst. When Bartimaeus hears that Jesus is among those passing by him, he cries out, *Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!*

Bartimaeus' cry recognizes Jesus as the Son of David. This is the first time in the book of Mark that this title, typically associated with the Jewish messiah, is used for Jesus. But the expectation attached to the Son of David is a royal, military savior. Mark probably chose to use the title now to draw readers' attention to the idea of a king making his way home to Jerusalem. Even though it appears that there is still some expectation that Jesus is a military conquer, Bartimaeus' plea to Jesus asks for mercy. He has probably heard other travelers passing by talk about Jesus and His acts. Their stories are not filled with a Jesus seeking vengeance on evildoers; rather, Bartimaeus knows a Jesus that shows extravagant mercy, especially to those whom others ignore. Bartimaeus' story is also the first time in Mark where Jesus does not tell those who encounter the miracle to be silent about it. Scholars comment that this is because Jesus no longer needs to conceal His

identity. Since His fame is so widespread at this point, and He is on his way to the cross, it's time for people to start to see the full picture of who He is.

No sooner is the call to Jesus out of Bartimaeus' mouth than the crowd attempts to silence him; after all, surely Jesus has better things to do with His time than listen to yet another beggar. Although his first attempt is futile, Bartimaeus cries out again, *Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!* This time, Jesus hears, pauses, and calls for him to come near. The crowd seems to pull what looks to me like a classic third base coach move: stay, stay, shhhhh, stop!....oh....go go go! When Jesus calls him, Bartimaeus immediately responds, throwing off his cloak (probably one of his only possessions), and leaving it behind to seek the face of Jesus. When he comes face to face with the Incarnation of God and is asked what he desires, Bartimaeus asks only for his sight.

Indeed, his sight is restored and he is healed. This healing, however, goes beyond simply physical eyesight; it makes Bartimaeus whole both physically and spiritually. The Greek word for "healed" here can also mean "saved." Jesus responds to Bartimaeus by telling him to go, for his faith has healed him (or has saved him), and Bartimaeus continues to respond to Jesus by following Him to Jerusalem. Jesus didn't ask him to follow, it was Bartimaeus' natural response. The wholeness experienced with Jesus was too good, too real, too eye-opening not to follow. The sight we receive from faith inspires us to leave behind everything in our past life and to follow Christ on the way to the cross, just like Bartimaeus.

The story of Bartimaeus is a bookend to Mark's section on spiritual blindness. This section begins in chapter 8, verse 22, when Jesus heals the blind man at Bethsaida and continues with the disciples and their spiritual blindness about the Transfiguration and who is the greatest among them. Also in this section we see the rich man who was blinded by his legalism and love of his possessions. In just three chapters, we see that many are in need of healing from spiritual blindness: Jesus' closest followers, the rich, the poor, and everyone in between. These examples preview not only the need but also the power that Jesus brings to rectify peoples' spiritual blindness.

Spiritual blindness is just as much of a problem for us today as it is for the characters we see in Mark's Gospel. Although, as Victor McCracken says, "Christ's death reveals the blindness of his followers, and His resurrection gives them the eyes to see the good news of God's kingdom," we still find ourselves spiritually blind even though we know the truth of the Good News. It's almost like we have scales on our eyes, just as Paul did when he was blinded on the road to Damascus, that keep us from embracing the fullness of our faith. Sometimes these scales act as blinders, keeping us from seeing things all together. Other times they act like prescription lenses that were not meant for us, like I mentioned at the beginning, which make us see ourselves, others, our faith, and even God in distorted ways.

Throughout the book of Job we see that scales of spiritual blindness shield Job from knowing why he is experiencing this time of trial; we definitely see the spiritual blindness of his well-meaning friends who look at his situation and give advice with scales of

spiritual distortion covering their eyes. The lectionary reading for today moves past that though. As we reach the final chapter of Job, it seems to come to a happily-ever-after kind of ending. But as Pastor Ben said last week, it's hard to imagine that a parent could reach a "happily-ever-after" after losing not only all of his belongings, but, more importantly, his children. Job made it through his trials, encountered God in a real, life-changing way, and his possessions were restored twofold. All is good, right? Well, when we get to verse five, Job's final conclusion is that he is nothing but dust and ashes. This phrase struck me as odd. First off, it wasn't the jubilant conclusion of restoration that I was expecting. Secondly, what does it even mean?

Scholars offer a variety of interpretations of what verse five could mean. They could be ashes of mourning, because Job sees himself as no better than dust and ashes in comparison to the goodness of God. Or these could be the ashes of rebirth that lead to his happy ending. The ashes and dust could also be symbolic of the human condition, referencing verses such as Genesis 3:19 and Ecclesiastes 3:20. The NLT translates verse 5, stating that Job is sitting in dust and ashes to show repentance. So, combining all of these viable interpretations, I picture Job sitting on this pile of dust and ashes that represents his former life. He is thinking about the fragility of his own human life, how little he really knows of God, and how to move on from the life he used to know. Sitting on this ash heap is a pivotal moment for Job. On one side is the trial he just came out of and on the other side is restoration and new life. This heap of ashes is a transitional point. He is out of the trial, but not yet to the abundance waiting for him in restoration.

I think we find ourselves sitting on ash heaps more often than we think, because we frequently find ourselves in transition. Our transitions are not always as major as Job's nor even carry a negative connotation. For instance, as a senior in college, I find myself sitting on somewhat of an ash heap right now. On one side is my childhood, adolescence, and the life I have created for myself at Greenville. But things are starting to fade and crumble, so I am left sitting on a heap of ashes of the life I used to know. Although I may have ignored it for awhile, I have reached a point where I know that I cannot put life as I used to know it back together just the way it was. While I know it's not a bad thing, it's kind of frightening. But I still sit on this ash heap, knowing that God's goodness and restoration waits for me on the other side, in the unknown.

Whatever the situation, many times when we are on our ash heap we are spiritually blind in some manner. We may have gone for awhile without noticing what we weren't seeing, but once we realize that there is a problem, we typically look down and see that we are on a pile of dust and ashes. We sit there unsure of what to do to rectify our blindness and enter more fully into right relationship with God. We acknowledge that we don't have all of the answers, or like the disciples, we just don't get Jesus' message all of the time. It's hard for us to understand the suffering in our own lives or even in the whole world, as we see events like refugees streaming into Europe and a government struggling to respond. No matter how much we seem to learn on the build-up to the heap of ashes, it never seems like enough to explain the brokenness, evil, pain, and grief that surrounds us. We are blind intellectually, emotionally, theologically, and spiritually, and we need healing that only the power of Christ can bring. To experience this healing, we must continually

pursue knowledge of the God we claim to love, and not be afraid to admit when that knowledge falls short and we sit blindly on our heap of ashes and cry out, *Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!*

The Psalm we recited today helps us carry on our conversation with God when we find ourselves on an ash heap. It reminds us to praise the Lord at all times and to seek Him, whether in the trial, on the ash heap, or after the restoration. When we cry out to Him, He answers us. These are all active experiences. We can't just passively sit in our sorrow, transition, or joy and hope for the best. We must seek, or at the very least be open to, an active encounter with the Triune God. As we start to prepare our hearts and minds for the Meal that awaits us at the Communion Table today, I am drawn to verse eight, which calls us to the active experience of tasting that the Lord is good. I don't see this taste as a polite bite of the Lord, nor is it simply savoring Him. To taste Him is to sink our teeth in and experience the fullness of God. Just as we must stand up and walk forward to receive the Holy Meal, we must actively and boldly sink our teeth into the relationship and restoration that God offers us.

Going back to our Gospel lesson, this is what we see Bartimaeus do. He is sitting on his ash heap on the side of the road in transition and recognizes his blindness, but when has the opportunity for an active experience with God, he calls and Jesus answers. He jumps up while he is still blind and runs to Christ, just as we can still run to the Table to receive Christ while we are still spiritually blind. And Jesus responds, despite the condition that we or Bartimaeus come in, and His mercy comes in a tangible form; it comes in a lasting form; it comes in a holistic form. Bartimaeus dared to sink his teeth in so as to experience Christ. He boldly cries to the Lord and goes to Him, and ends up stepping into restoration and continues on with praise.

Brothers and sisters, we have all seen trials in our own lives and in the world around us. We know the ash heaps that are forming or that we are already sitting on, and we know that if it depended upon our finite power and knowledge, the situation would look hopeless. We know that despite our best efforts, we will always see the world, God, and His people through an unclear, distorted lens. We admit our blindness, but know that it is not the end of the story, because Jesus went on from Jericho, into Jerusalem, died on the cross to reveal our blindness, and rose again to give us eyes to see the Kingdom on earth as it is in Heaven. So as we come forward to receive Communion today, jump up as Bartimaeus did! Leave your past life behind to come and taste and see that the Lord is good and is a God of restoration. And as you walk back to your seat, and to your home, school, or workplace, keep praising the Lord, proclaiming that you once were blind, but now you see. Amen.