

“Take heart, get up, he is calling”

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A blind beggar sits by the side of the road. He receives his sight and follows Jesus. A familiar story to readers of the Gospels. But wait a minute...we know better, don't we? This “immediately he regained his sight” stuff... people don't immediately regain their sight. The late neurologist Oliver Sacks pointed out that, if the story is true, if it really happened this way, then Bartimaeus experienced a double miracle. Not only had Jesus fixed the optic hardware. He must also have installed the necessary software in the brain that allowed him to make sense of the data coming through his eyes. The double miracle.

Some people, when they read one of the healing stories in the Gospel, immediately get a little uncomfortable. They might get technical. We don't think that healing happens like that any more- or at least we have not seen it ever happen like that – so we distance ourselves a bit from the story. Others people see it as a compelling narrative, and use a different kind of imagination and wonder, “Where am I in this story? What if I were in that crowd, or one of the disciples, or the blind beggar, Bartimaeus?” Others read it as a metaphorical story or a parable, and wonder what the point of this teaching could be. I suggest that all of these reading techniques are useful and have their merit: a little suspicion, a little imagination, a little big-picture thinking.

We could think a little bit about the condition of blindness, knowing that in the Bible, blindness is more than a medical diagnosis. The journey of Jesus to Jerusalem in the Gospel of Mark is framed by two healings of blind men. In between, Jesus speaks to the disciples about why he is there, what will happen, and what it means. And the disciples just don't get it. They do not see what Jesus is talking about. The healing of Bartimaeus is the last miracle before the crucifixion. This blind beggar does see, and follows with open eyes as they take the road to the cross.

This story is telling us that the disciples of Jesus (and we, at times) have vision problems. Is it an inability to see the forest for the trees, is it short-sightedness, is it optic fatigue? Those seem like a pretty benign diagnoses. Or is it an inherited blindness, an inherited arrogance? The Rev. Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas, a professor of philosophy and religion, describes white privilege as “The privilege to be blind” – blind to the injustice of the system. We may need a miracle of restored sight, both hardware and software, both awareness and humility, to have clarity in following Jesus.

We know that seeing the hard parts of life exacts a price. When we see how broken the world is, we lose some of our innocence. We may even suffer in that restored sight. Seeing clearly can feel like danger. And it may compel us to change our lives. It might call into question everything we used to believe. It might pull apart our worldview, our faith, our security. Seeing can devastate us.

An extreme example of this is the story of the photojournalist Kevin Carter. He covered the 1993 famine in the Sudan, and took a photograph of a small girl who had collapsed while walking to a food station. Just a few feet behind the starving girls, a vulture was stalking her. A close friend

of the photographer said that after taking the photo, he sat under a tree and cried and chain-smoked, unable to distance himself from the horror of what he saw. He could not “*unsee*” what he had seen. In 1994, Carter won a Pulitzer prize for the photograph. Two months later, he committed suicide.

A blind beggar sits by the side of the road. Bartimaeus hears who is coming and sets the story in motion; he cries out. He is part of a long tradition of those who cry out - you might say that the speech of the poor is the cornerstone of our spiritual history. The Israelites in Egypt “groaned under their slavery and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose to God,” as is written in Exodus. Bartimaeus knows something; he senses something. Jesus of Nazareth is passing by, and this is Son of David time, this is Messiah time. This is the time predicted, when the poor hear good news, the captives are released, and the blind recover their sight. Who would think that the blind beggar by the side of the road would know what time it was? Bartimaeus knows something: that he has the courage to demand mercy, to cry out as his ancestors had done. The people in the crowd tell him to shut up, but he just cries out more loudly. He is getting more courageous: this is Messiah time, and he has waited long enough.

For the crowd, this is awkward. This could not be **that** time. That would mean sharing with the beggars. That would mean that all the other beggars would get noisy too. They would have to look and see how many beggars were out there and, as we know, seeing the hard parts of life exacts a price. It hurts. It raises questions.

It is awkward. But as is so often true in Scripture, the speech of the wounded one releases transforming energy. Jesus stood still, and said, “Call him here.” The crowd changes their tune: “Take heart, get up, he is calling you.” I am so struck with the transformation of that gathered crowd. They change from being gatekeepers to being friends, to being enablers: a little miracle in itself. They turn around and walk another way. They repent and reform.

Speaking of reform, today is called Reformation Sunday, when we mark a momentous change in the church in the early 16th century that birthed the Protestant denominations. In our time, we still use the word reform, but we have also adopted more secular words and practices, like restructuring, renovating, reorganization when we talk about the work to be done in church. But let’s not lose sight of the repenting and reforming. At its core the church is a body of people who are open to the possibility of turning around, of new vision and new life. The church is a voice crying out, calling for mercy, calling for the wandering people to return, calling everyone to a lavish banquet. We celebrate reform...and yet - it means that something will be changed, and change sounds like a synonym for “loss.”

We can look at reformations of the past with 20/20 hindsight, and feel complacent and satisfied even as we are blind to new needs for reformation and restoration. Back in the 1960’s many people thought that Martin Luther King Jr.’s preaching and protesting was just troublemaking –loud cries at an awkward and inconvenient time. Now the troublemaker has become hero and a martyr. Children today are amazed at the collective blindness of the American people, who seemed content to live with the injustice of segregation and brutality. Such are the rhythms of reformation. Troublemakers become heroes. What was radical change becomes an honored tradition. We are always moving towards restoration of sight, from blindness to clarity, from gatekeeping to welcoming. Reformations teach us that reforming needs to continue. Racial injustice is not just a thing of the past, as we all know.

So that brings up the question for us: where does a clear light need to shine, what will bring Messiah time to our world? Where are our blind spots and which voices do we refuse to hear? Is there a reformer here – or out there – and how will we treat him or her? What are we allowing to happen today that will cause future generations to wonder how we could be so blind to the Gospel?

Into these rather dark musings come the encouraging words: “Take heart, get up, he is calling you.” We are all blind beggars, each one bearing wounds and limitations. We are all part of the crowd, too, wishing those groans and cries were not quite so loud. We are all hoping for the courage and energy to ask for mercy, and then to spring up and meet the healer. We are all hoping – and fearing – that it is Messiah time.

What does this Healer Messiah say when the blind beggar comes close? “What do you want me to do for you?” This is a key question, and others in the Gospel answer in other ways. The rich young man asks for eternal life. James and John ask for places of honor in the Kingdom of Glory. But Bartimaeus wants a real change. “Let me see.” I think that this was the answer Jesus was hoping for all along: a person who really wanted to see. A person who was eager to see, even though the world would never be the same. A person of courage and faith.

Jesus names this when he says, “Go, your faith has made you whole.” Faith is one of those tricky words: it means commitment, it means trust. We could think of it as an attitude or a gift. Paul Tillich called it “the willingness to be apprehended by the future.” But we could also think of it as a verb. The minister and writer Bruce Sanguin uses the phrase “We faith new futures into being.” So faith has less to do with assenting to or believing in events of the past and more to do with how we approach the future.

I am always interested in the patterns of Jesus’s speech. To the blind beggar, he says, “Come here.” Then he says, “Go.” In that moment, there is healing. In that moment, the beggar follows. There is this interesting relationship here between going and following. He goes away from his former life, his cloak and his begging, but he doesn’t go from Jesus. He is following and *faithing* him into the future. In a way, we go through the same pattern: we are called, we are healed and we are told to go out. It’s a real turn-around. It’s a reformation. The healing is the push that sends us out the door.

What does this mean for us, here, at the Norwich Congregational Church? We are called and questioned by our stories. How well do we see the needs of those around us? How much can we risk to do so? We have been called close to the Messiah...can we be open to the healing of soul and spirit that is offered? It will mean turning around, and reforming ourselves a bit. We might have to leave some baggage behind, as Bartimaeus left his cloak. But I hope that we can be as nimble as that blind beggar, and spring up with joy when we hear that call.
Amen.