

ARE YOU BLIND?

(02/04/2024)

Scripture Lesson: Matthew 20:29-34

“Lord, let our eyes be opened.” (Mt. 20:33)

For those of you who are listening to this sermon through my podcast or who have downloaded it from your computer either from my email or the church website, i.e., all those who are not worshipping with us this morning, you probably don't see the sermon title that appears in our Sunday bulletin. The sermon title is “Are You Blind?” You also probably haven't noticed that this sermon title, thanks to Rick, is posted on the sign in front of our church.

I thought this thought-provoking question would be a catchy way to get people's attention as they glance at our sign during their drive down Southville Road either on their way to the train station or heading home to Westborough at the end of a long day. And people do read our sign; they comment on it! Since the theme of our pre-Lenten reflections is healing, and since the scripture lesson for today is the account of Jesus' healing of the two blind men, I thought this wording would be a concise but powerful way to introduce the theme and perhaps even entice some of the passersby, perhaps out of curiosity, to check us out this morning!

Then my wife saw the sign and just had to comment on it. She has a habit of doing that. She said that it didn't make sense, since if you were blind, you couldn't read the sign! You wouldn't appreciate how clever it is, nor would you struggle to come up with an answer to this existential question. In fact, you probably wouldn't be driving down Southville Road past our church—or you shouldn't.

I guess I just didn't think it through fully. That happens to me a lot. Or, perhaps, just perhaps, we might be talking about a different kind of blindness, the kind of blindness that afflicts even people whose vision is rated by their ophthalmologist as 20-20.

As you know, I get excited when I find that a passage of scripture appears in all three synoptic gospels! I know; it doesn't take much to get me excited, but that's not the point. The point is that this passage of scripture was part of the oral tradition out of which Mark wrote, and it was also part of the oral tradition in the churches that were served by Matthew and Luke. To be sure, there are slight variations in the three accounts. I don't have any problem with that. Remember, the material that was included in these gospels was not written down until years after the events occurred. It is not in the least surprising that 30-40 years after this healing took place, different people would remember the event differently.

In all three gospels, this healing takes place in Jericho, a town approximately one hundred miles northeast of Jerusalem. It happens immediately preceding Jesus' triumphal entry into the great city. This is Jesus' last recorded healing. According to Matthew, Jesus heals two blind men. Luke tells us that he heals one blind man. In Mark's account, Jesus heals one man, a man whose name is Bartimaeus.

Matthew tells us that Jesus is leaving Jericho accompanied by a large crowd. Two blind men, who are sitting by the roadside, hear the commotion and ask what is happening. When they are told that Jesus of Nazareth is passing by, they make a desperate attempt to get his attention. They shout as loudly as they possibly can, “Lord, have mercy on us! Have mercy on us, Son of David!”

The crowd, which is comprised of Jesus’ disciples and other followers, try to silence the two men. Just as Jesus’ disciples tried to chase the children away because they felt their master was too busy to spend his time with children, now they try to chase these two blind beggars away because their master has a lot on his mind.

Jesus’ followers know that this journey to Jerusalem is not like his other journeys. He has told them that he is going to Jerusalem to die. He has told them that unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it cannot bear fruit. I suspect that Jesus’ disciples can not understand what Jesus is saying about his death and resurrection. I also suspect they do not grasp that this teaching applies to them.

Jesus must be in a serious or solemn frame of mind as he turns his face toward Jerusalem. I doubt if he is thinking about anything other than what lies before him. Yet, when he hears the pleas of these two blind beggars, he comes to a full stop. Scripture tells us, “Jesus stood still and called them saying ‘What do you want me to do for you?’ They said to him, ‘Lord, let our eyes be opened.’”

The next line reads, “Moved with compassion, Jesus touched their eyes. Immediately they regained their sight and followed him.” As we noted just a few weeks ago, healing begins with compassion. Out of his great compassion, out of his great love, out of the depth of his feeling for those who suffer, Jesus restores the men’s sight; he takes away the blindness that has afflicted them for some time, perhaps for most of their lives.

I have no doubt that Jesus actually healed these blind men, that he literally restored their sight. However, even if we are not physically blind, this healing miracle brings a message, a teaching to us. Blindness is a limitation in our perception of the world. To be blind is to live in darkness. Because we cannot see the light, we cannot see life, other people, and even ourselves clearly. By this definition, many of us are afflicted with some degree of blindness.

This reminds me of a line from the 1970’s television series *Kung Fu*. Kwai Chang Caine, nicknamed Grasshopper, who is played by David Carradine, has entered a shaolin monastery as a child. Caine has developed a deep connection with one of the shaolin masters named Po, a grandfatherly monk who is totally blind.

In this particular episode, Caine tries to quietly sneak up behind the blind master. Of course, it doesn’t work! The master, who hears his footsteps and knows immediately who it is, says, “Hello, Grasshopper!”

The two then engage in a conversation. Caine says to his blind kung-fu master, “It must be a terrible thing to live in darkness.” Po replies, “Yes, it is a terrible thing to live in darkness. And fear is the greatest darkness.”

Fear is the greatest darkness. I wish we could relearn that lesson now! As we saw in our Advent reflections, fear is the predominant emotion that lies behind prejudice and hatred. And what Po said is true. Fear blinds us to so much in other people and in life.

We need to become conscious of how we are like these two blind beggars. Our vision may be impaired by the narrow focus of our concerns, by our egocentrism, by the blinders that keep so much of life from entering our field of vision. We need to become conscious of our inability to see ourselves as God sees us, to see other people as God sees them. If we become conscious of our blindness, we will turn to Jesus for healing. And Jesus can heal us just as he healed the two blind beggars.

In Luke’s account, from the way the blind man frames his question it appears that he was once able to see. He says, “Lord, let me see again.” The man has somehow lost his sight along the way. Perhaps his blindness arose from some wound, some trauma, some great pain that he experienced in his life, a pain that blocked or distorted his view of life. The man asks Jesus to restore him to wholeness. Jesus tells the man, “Receive your sight; your faith has saved you.” Immediately the man “regained his sight and followed him, glorifying God.”

If we, like these two blind beggars turn to God for healing, if we open ourselves to Christ, if we allow Christ to enter into our lives, if we are open and receptive to change, Jesus will help us to see more clearly. Though once we were blind, now we are able to see. We are able to see God, life, other people, and ourselves more clearly, perhaps for the very first time.

Whether the healing is of one man or two, all three gospels record the same response to the healing. The men who have been healed become followers of Jesus. Their response is instantaneous and total! Perhaps this is because they “see” more deeply than other people, more deeply even than many of Jesus’ relatively clueless disciples.

Like these blind beggars, once we are healed, once our eyes are opened, we will respond as they did. We will have no choice. We will become followers of Jesus!

It might be a coincidence, or it might be a synchronistic event, but this past Thursday was the feast day of Saint Brigid of Ireland, one of the three patron saints of Ireland (along with St. Patrick and St. Columba). I know we didn’t celebrate her feast day this past week; we didn’t do it up big this year in our church, but I would not like it to pass without commenting on an incident in Brigid’s life that touches on the theme of blindness.

Brigid, who was born around 450 and who died around 535 C.E. was supposedly born to a noble father and an enslaved mother. She was sold, along with her mother, to a Druid, whom she later converted to Christianity. The king of Ulster, who was impressed by her piety, gave her

a piece of land in Kildare, where she founded the first nunnery in Ireland. The community became a double abbey for monks and nuns, with Brigid, the abbess, ranking above the abbot. This, as you know, was amazingly counter-cultural for her time! It tells us something about the authority that this woman had, an authority that emerged from and was grounded in her spiritual depths.

One of the stories or legends of St. Brigid that I like is about Dara, a blind nun who asked Brigid to pray for the restoration of her sight. Brigid receives Dara's request, prays for or with Dara, and Dara's sight is miraculously restored. However, Dara suddenly realizes that the newfound clarity of her sight in the outer world is blurring her sight of God in the eye of her soul. So, Dara asks Brigid to return her to "the beauty of darkness." And, I assume, Brigid does.

This legend speaks to the matter of different kinds of blindness. We may be able to see perfectly well in relation to the outside world, but we may fail to see God; we may feel to see the presence of God with and within us. And, as Dara knew, if we are forced to choose between outer darkness and inner darkness, we should choose outer darkness. The most important light is the inner light.

There is another story about Brigid that I would like to mention. Brigid purportedly changed water into beer for a leper colony, and she provided enough beer for eighteen churches from a single barrel. I have a sense that the lepers must have really loved Brigid! Finally someone is treating them like fellow human beings! I mean, what Irish man would not like to partake of a Guinness every now and then? Brigid is sometimes considered to be one of the patron saints of beer in addition to her being hailed as the patron saint of dairy farmers, cattle, midwives, babies, computers, and blacksmiths. Computers?! That's pretty good for having lived in the 6th century!

My interest in Brigid, of course, in addition to removing and then restoring Dara's blindness, is her ability to turn water into beer. She is definitely someone I would invite to a Super Bowl party! I know that Taylor Swift is cute, but I would prefer Brigid. Then again, Taylor Swift has a lot of money; she could probably buy as much beer as we need, especially since I need only one to last me the night. But that's not the point. The point is that if we ever decide to have a patron saint of this church, I will cast my vote for Brigid!

The scripture passage that we heard this morning, the description of a miraculous healing, invites us to enter into a state of prayer. What the two men said to Jesus, what they cried out to him, was actually a prayer. They verbalized what might be called a prayer of invocation, invoking Jesus' presence. Their faith, and the healing that they experience in and through it, encourages us to invoke Jesus' presence both with us and within us. It assures us that, if we invite him into our lives, Jesus can restore our sight. Where there was darkness, he will bring light. Where we were blind in our understanding of ourselves, in our perception of other people, where our prejudices have kept us from seeing our brothers and sisters as Jesus would see them, he will bring healing and wholeness.

As we gather around this table in the Sacrament of Holy Communion, let us open our eyes, our hearts, and our minds to the indwelling presence of Christ. Just as of old, to experience his presence is to be healed of whatever infirmities afflict us. When this happens, like the blind beggars we will find ourselves responding with deep gratitude, with great love. We will become followers of our Lord, committed disciples of the Way.

Then perhaps we can bring light into the lives of others, and to a world that desperately needs it.

A communion meditation shared by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson

The First Community Church of Southborough

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