

“What do you see?”

Mark 8:22-26

November 13, 2011

Take a minute and try to put yourself in this man’s shoes. He lives every moment of every day in total darkness. Whether he is asleep or awake, whether his eyes are open or closed, there is no difference. The world is a sea of blank ink, filled with hazards. Certainly, there are places that are familiar, places he can navigate by counting steps. And yet, as soon as he moves a step away from that familiar world or as soon as anything changes--a chair is moved or a log falls on a path--he is forced to throw his hands out into blind space and grope for the next hidden object.

You could try to simulate his plight if you wanted to drum up a little extra empathy. You could close your eyes and try to walk around the room. You could go down in your basement at home and turn out all the lights. The thing is though that as soon as you decided enough was enough, there would always be a way out. You would just open your eyes. You would just flip on the lights again. You see, the blind man’s plight is not only that everything is dark. His real plight is that the lights are never coming on again. This is the way it is. This is the way that it will always will be. Forever and ever...and forever is a very long time.

In a world that could be particularly cruel to those who were sick or handicapped, telling them that they were being punished by God for some sin of the past, in a world in which being blind would have made you an easy target for a thief or simply for someone who wanted to torment you, this blind man is lucky. He has people who actually care about him. The text tells us that he has a group of people who bring him to see Jesus of Nazareth, the charismatic healer who is coming to town. Word has passed across the

countryside that this man, this Jesus, is more than just some charlatan of a healer. This man has a proven track record of healing. These people care enough about this man to gather him up and find out.

Now, pause long enough here to use your imagination again. If you are the blind man, imagine how much energy you have poured out into your life accepting things the way they are: “This is just how it is. I’ve got to get on with my life.” Now, imagine the “push and pull” of the feelings inside you on this day: “What if he can help me? What if I could see? Do I dare even allow myself to hope for such a thing? Or, is it just wiser and better for me in the long run to say, ‘Thanks, but no thanks’ to this offer? What if I am totally unprepared to deal with the whole experience of hoping and then having those hopes dashed?” The one thing he has going for him, though, is these friends. These people were his lifelines in the world. What if he went with them as a simple nod to his friends: “They’ve been so nice to me. The least I can do is humor them.”

They go. Almost as soon as they meet Jesus, things become exponentially more difficult. Do you recall what Jesus does? Before he does anything else, Jesus takes the man by the hand and leads him out of the village. Stop and consider that! Jesus, a total stranger, takes the man by the hand and leads him. If you only imagine that, you should be able to feel the sheer, unqualified trust that would have taken on the man’s part. Most of the men in this sanctuary this morning won’t ask a stranger for directions when we’re lost in our cars. Why? Because we know they might lead us in the wrong direction! And, oh yes, because we hate admitting that we’re actually lost. We are taught to mistrust strangers. Now, imagine that stranger is leading you and you cannot see. It is entirely likely that as Jesus led this man out of the village, he was going further than he’d ever gone in his life! Think of the trust that

is in play here! The blind man leaves everything that is familiar and every friend that he has behind, all on the gamble that maybe, just maybe he might see.

To top things off, the whole healing gets real messy, real fast. Jesus stops the blind man and has him stand still. Maybe in the silence of that moment, the blind man just moved his head back and forth, trying to get oriented, trying to discern what was going to happen next. Then, to be quite frank, the next thing happens and it couldn't have been pleasant or have made much sense: Jesus' saliva coats the man's eyes. Some commentators think it was saliva and mud that Jesus had mixed. Some commentators think Jesus spit on the man's eyes. Let me just offer the comment that this had to be utterly shocking and confusing and even a bit disgusting for the man. Maybe there was comfort when Jesus laid his hands on him. Or maybe the blind man just thought to himself, "Dear God...What's next?"

"Can you see anything?" Those are the words that shattered the darkness. "Can you see anything?" The truth was, though, that the darkness is already beginning to fade almost as soon as the first word is spoken. Something is happening. Things are changing. Things are definitely getting brighter. The thing is, though, that nothing makes sense: "I can see people, but they look like trees, walking." "I am no longer blind but I still can't really see. I'm stuck 'in-between.' Everything is fuzzy and out of focus. I still can't really tell what's going on."

Now, a charismatic healer in that day might well have never taken on the blind man in the first place. After all, healing someone of deafness in one ear is a much easier call. Getting some person who limps to limp less is a much more achievable goal. Taking on the blind man is a big leap here. Even if a charismatic healer would

have tried to heal the blind man, he might well have settled at this point for 20/200 vision and celebrated the day! The thing is that Jesus doesn't stop there. Jesus touches the man again. He looks deeply into the man's eyes. He keeps trying until the man sees everything clearly and his sight was fully restored. Jesus is persistent. Then, unlike all the other healers in that world who would have wanted a promotional tour after this healing, Jesus tells the man not to even go near the village.

This might all seem pretty confusing...until you begin to see clearly. Let me see if I can help. I assume that none of us have been literally blind in our lifetimes. (No...we're not talking about the age fifty-plus need for "readers" here!) Think more deeply than that, though! Haven't you been blind in your life without even knowing it? I have. I have been "blinded" with rage--only a couple of times but it scared me. Jealousy can blind us. Hatred can blind us. Fear can blind us. Anxiety, depression, and grief can certainly blind us, too. Life is so full of possibilities. The people around us are incredibly complex. I think that we are fooling ourselves if we think that we spend more time seeing clearly than we do being blind or perhaps, "Seeing people, but they look like trees, walking." On a good day on our own perhaps that's the best we do--gain a partial vision of what's going on around us. On the tough days, maybe we just walk like the blind man, stumbling along and waving our arms in front of us as we go.

Consider this: the more time I spend reading about deeply spiritual people across different traditions, the one characteristic they seem to share is awareness. It's not that they are saints. What distinguishes them is that they see clearly. They see the world as it is. They see the people around them for who they are. They see the complexities and the depth and the nuances. Given

that truth, isn't it pretty presumptuous that we start out thinking that we already see the world clearly from the start?

Maybe, like the blind man, we have friends with big enough hearts and with clear enough vision that they can see our blindness and lead us where we need to go. Do we have the the kind of friends who can look us in the eye and say, "Mark, I think you're missing something here?" We would have to trust them to lead us to help. We would have to actually come to grips with trust. And honestly, that's a big reach for most of us. We would rather lead. We would rather be the "helper" than the "help-ee." Who really wants to make themselves vulnerable that way? Who wants to utter statements that begin... "I really need your help..." Isn't one of the biggest problems with seeing the world clearly that we would be forced to take a clear look at ourselves?

So, you've got good friends and they lead you to where you need to go to see clearly. Maybe you're led to a group--A.A. or O.A. or N.A.. Maybe you're led to a counselor or a teacher, someone whom you can talk to and be honest with and who will be honest back with you. Maybe you're led to the back pew of a sanctuary and invited to listen and pray and maybe, on a particularly daring day, join in a song or two. Whatever your path is toward the enlightenment you need, here's the truth: it is God who is going to be working through the person who grabs you by the hand. It is God who is going to lead you away from everything you thought you knew and into the unknown. It is God who is going to be the source of that healing. And the truth is, it is going to be a mess. Real change is never a neat and tidy process. Real change always involves spit and mud and people touching each other and looking deeply into one another's eyes. Real change is always an ultra-marathon and never a sprint. The good news is we worship a God who does not quit, who won't let go, who stays with us when we're

still only half way there, whatever the “there” might be that God is leading us toward.

God stays with us until we see clearly. God is determined and caring, loving and persistent. God is a pit bull who won't let go. When it is our turn to be the helper, we ought to keep those things in mind and live up to that example rather than spend quite so much time evaluating how we look to others while we help. When it is our turn to be the one who is helped, well, if we know God already, we ought to realize that it's time to be led and spend a bit less time fighting God's leading hand.

We are all blind at times, growing used to the darkness like bats living in a cave, counting our steps like the blind man and staying only in the midst of what's familiar until we even forget we're doing such things. Other days, we spend our time half-perceiving what's going on around us, which, in the end, almost makes us more dangerous, plowing ahead and mowing over things as we proceed on the basis of our half-truths. We don't come to clarity and then find God. Rather, like the blind man we are led into God's presence and offered the invitation to follow: “Lead me...Guide me...Help me...Show me!” Those are the prayers of genuine people of faith.

May God help us all to see clearly!