

A Leap of Faith

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Mark 10:46-52

Hebrews 7:23-28

When we think about blindness, what comes to mind?

I think we would imagine our ability to see things clearly, or accurately,
is in some way impeded.

I think we can agree that there are many different forms and levels of blindness.

Some people are born completely blind,
while others develop blindness for different reasons during their life.

This change in ability, or perception,
has generated a lot of commonly used expressions in our vernacular:

“Blind as a bat, turning a blind eye, being blind-sided, driving blind,”
just to name a few.

All of these expressions relate not being able to see, or perceive accurately,
often to negative results.

Our scripture from Mark this morning is all about blindness.

In fact, it's the last part of a travel narrative of Jesus and his disciples
that started with another story of blindness and healing.

This section began with Jesus healing the blind man at Bethsaida

and concludes with this story around Jericho.

Both stories involve healing physical blindness of beggars along the road,

and the argument could be made that the stories in the interim

concern another form of blindness, spiritual blindness.

As I've mentioned previously, in those intervening stories,

Jesus highlights again and again that the disciples just aren't getting it.

They have the knowledge and the ability to see Christ's reality,

but their perception, how they interpret the reality around them,

is askew.

Jesus tells them three times the kind of messiah he is,

the suffering servant of Isaiah who is sacrificed by a corrupt world,

yet they continue to have their delusions of grandeur.

They can't get past the images of glory and power

that they envision their participation will garner them.

Even when Jesus tells them the upside-down order of things

in the kin-dom that draws near,

they still fight to preserve the exclusiveness of their positions,

seeking privilege for themselves,

and trying to exclude others to maintain their positions.

For them, they still see through the world's lens,

where there are those who are in, and correspondingly, those who are out.

Even in our story today, when Bartimaeus calls out to Jesus,

his followers rebuke him and try to shut him up.

They don't have time to deal with this outcast along the side of the road.

He's not part of their parade, he doesn't deserve their attention.

So Jesus stops and instructs his followers to call out to him,

yet again reminding them that it is the least who are the greatest

in the pecking order of God's realm.

And then these fickle followers completely change their tune,

cheerfully encouraging the man to come forward

who they just pretty much told to shut up and leave them alone.

Jesus asks Bartimaeus the same question that he asks James and John,

“What do you want me to do for you?”

He leaps up, discarding his cloak, and cries, “Rabbi, I want to see.”

While it seems like a minor detail, his casting aside his cloak is a big deal.

Being a blind beggar outcast, his cloak was immensely important.

It was his blanket and bed, his pillow, and most importantly,

it caught the money thrown at him

that may have missed his outstretched hand.

He was so confident in his faith in Jesus being the saving messiah

that he literally discarded his most crucial, valuable possession

to seek him out.

His response draws into sharp focus

the contrast between the disciples' faith perspective and that of the kin-dom.

On one hand you have the presumptive faithful,

those who have been with and taught by Jesus all along.

They would be the ones you would assume have all the right answers.

Yet when asked the question of what they want from Jesus,

their concern is their status, where they fit in the hierarchy.
They seek seats of honor as part of the “in crowd,”
and are making sure those places are not threatened
by keeping out those they feel don't fit in,
those that just are good enough.

On the other hand, you have the presumed reprobate and outcast,
from the group that is considered unclean and tainted,
cursed because of their perceived unrighteousness and sin.
Instead of seeking status and power, this man cries out for God's mercy.
He seeks justice and grace instead of self-aggrandizement.
Instead of being part of the “in crowd,”
his faith is forged in loss, exclusion and helplessness.
His response is obviously the opposite
of those most would consider the “faithful.”

Which begs the question, who are the true faithful?

Are they those following along the road with Jesus,
the selected and self-appointed “in crowd,”
who sees their job to act as a buffer,
excluding those who are not “worthy?”

Or is it the afflicted, those who reach out to Jesus with genuine need,
completely assured in their faith that he will be the solution
to whatever is the cause of their affliction?

The ones who leave praising Christ to all who will listen,
even when they are told to keep it to themselves.

The ones who just can't keep quiet.

Today's story also has a symbolic element.

The disciples have been with Jesus on his mission
as his popularity and the crowds have grown.

They've been riding this wave with him.

Yet as he makes his final leg and arrives at Jerusalem and the tide turns,
they scatter and go underground, or even outright deny him.

Then we have Bartameus, who is unique in the healing stories
in the fact that he chooses to follow along with Jesus instead of just walking off,
choosing to journey with him on his last leg
to public humiliation and crucifixion.

What kind of faith vision do we have?

Are we like the disciples, looking through the worlds lens,
seeking to be in the "in crowd," part of the right clique,
and looking for rewards for ourselves down the line?

Or are we seeing things clearly through kin-dom lenses,
humbly, spending our time with the "out crowd,"
or better yet, working to get rid of the whole notion of "in" and "out."

Is our focus on just the easy and beneficial parts of our faith journey:

the fellowship and socializing, the food and fun?

Or do we embrace the difficult and hard parts as well:

the sacrifice, the comforting of the lost and outcast?



So, there's a story of a little boy who's completely freaked out by krepelach.

For those of you who might not be familiar,

krepelach is a Jewish dumpling that one generally eats in soup broth.

Anyway, this little boy is full of fear and loathing

every time a nice bowl of soup with krepelach is put in front of him,

he takes one look and shrieks, "AAAHHHHH!! KREPLACH!!!"

His mother is concerned and goes to consult the rabbi, who advises her:

he problem is that he's scared because he doesn't know what it is.

Show him exactly what goes into the krepelach,

explain slowly and clearly that it's nothing to be afraid of, and he'll be fine.

So one day, mom takes her boy into the kitchen, puts him on a high stool,

and, with lots of smiles and reassuring pats,

begins to deconstruct the dreaded dumpling.

First she rolls out a piece of dough. Holds it up. "Just like a pancake, she says.

"You love pancakes."

"Just like a pancake," said the little boy.

Then she chops up meat and gathers it into a ball.

"Just like a meatball. Mmm, meatballs! Yummy meatballs!"

"Just like a meatball," says the little boy, and smiles.

Mom then places the meat on the dough and folds the dough over. Holds it up:

"Just like a little hat."

"Just like a little hat," the kid says, comfortably.

She cooks it up: just like a dumpling. like in the Chinese restaurant?

Just like a dumpling, o.k., o.k.

Mom's had a pot of chicken soup on the stove;

she now pours some into a bowl and offers it to the little boy,

who responds eagerly. Sure, soup; he loves soup.

Just before putting the bowl in front of her son, she drops the kreplach in the soup.

Kid takes one look at it and screams, "AAAHHHH!! KREPLACH!!"

How much are we like that little boy?

We may feel comfortable with many of the individual parts of our Christian faith,

but when we put it all together and see the call and risk of discipleship

sometimes we, too, may find ourselves saying "AAAHHHHH!!"

But that's what this journey we've chosen is all about.

With the good also comes the cost that must be counted.

Like the disciples, we love to look at the world through our own, rose-colored glasses,

only seeing the good from our perspective of being part of Jesus' crowd,

the faithful followers.

But like those early followers, when we make this clique an exclusive club,

the implication is that there will be those that are excluded.

When we have an “in crowd” and outcasts, it rarely goes well for those on the outside.

As we saw this weekend in Pittsburgh,

those who have often been defined as being on the outside, on the fringes,

usually become the scapegoats

for those who need someone to blame

for all that is wrong with their lives and their culture.

We need to have open eyes that see clearly the call of faith we have responded to.

A faith that brings in the outcast, that seeks to heal the broken and downtrodden.

A call that often leads not to an easy stroll but a challenging hike,

often over uncomfortable terrain.

One that never finds us on the side of exclusion, of stereotyping, or scapegoating.

After all, we follow a risen savior who is the ultimate scapegoat,

the ultimate outcast sacrificed to satisfy the hate of his own culture.

We're called to seek justice and show the same grace we have been given.

In a culture increasingly dominated by voices of hate, of division,

of us versus them,

may we be the voice to stand against those who encourage hate

and the violence it creates.

I pray we always remember our calling to stand beside and lift up the “least of these”

among us,

those who suffer solely because of who they are.

May we always seek to be on the outside looking in,

never on the inside keeping others out.

And may God give us the strength to cast aside those cloaks that we cling to for comfort and security, so we can leap up in faith to follow in the footsteps of Jesus. Amen.