

Narrative Lectionary- Bartimaeus Healed

February 21, 2016

I have said before that the Gospels are not simply historical narratives of the life of Jesus; they are sermons that Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are preaching. Do you remember we have a verse that we are using as a lens into the Gospel of Mark? The lens comes from Mark 1:15, where Jesus says: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” So the question is, What kind of a kingdom will it be? What will power look like? What ideas do we need to repent of? In this middle section of Mark’s Gospel, Mark will show what kind of Messiah Jesus will be, and what the reign of God looks like.

We have two stories of the healing of blind men in Mark’s Gospel. And they bookend the three announcements of his passion and death. In the first story (chapter 8) people bring a blind man to Jesus and they beg Jesus to heal him. Jesus puts some saliva on the man’s eyes and lays his hands on them, and says, Can you see anything? And the man says, “I can see people, but they look like trees, walking.”

So Jesus touches his eyes again, and this second time he now sees everything clearly. He needs a second touch. And many scholars believe Mark is using this as a metaphor. Oftentimes we don’t see things very clearly. We don’t see what is best for us and for our neighbor. Sin, selfishness casts a film over our eyes, and it’s hard to see God’s purposes for us. We need a second touch and a third touch.

This is the story of the disciples. It is clear that their vision is fuzzy concerning who Jesus is. They are going to need Jesus to touch them again and again. Jesus three times after this predicts his suffering and death, and they just don’t want to hear it. They just don’t get it. The first time Peter rebukes Jesus, and says, No, that’s not the kind of Savior we need! The second time Jesus tells them about his impending death, he catches them arguing about who is the greatest. So he says, If you want to be first, you need to be last and a servant of all. Then he places a child on his lap, and says, If you want to be great, welcome the vulnerable, like this little one. And the third time he talks about his passion, in today’s reading, James and John want to know if they can have positions of honor when he establishes his new kingdom on earth.

As one commentator said, If there had been a wall nearby, Jesus would have been banging his head against. Three passion predictions, three blundering missteps by the disciples, and three lessons that he teaches, all between these two stories of healing.

So in today's Gospel (Mark 10:32-52) Jesus is going up to Jerusalem, which means he is on his way to the last week of his life. The disciples are hanging back; they are amazed at what he has been telling them, and afraid of what may happen to all of them. And pulls them aside, and announces his passion for the third time, this time in great detail: "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; and they will mock him, and spit upon him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again."

The disciples seem to blow past this, and the next thing we hear is James and John coming up to Jesus and saying, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." And Jesus very non-judgmentally asks, "What is it you want me to do for you?" And they respond, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." In other words, we want to be in positions of power when you establish your earthly kingdom.

Now, we might look at James and John and think, Well, shame on them. How selfish of them. But didn't they have some reason to think that they were a little more special than the other disciples? Jesus had chosen these two brothers and Peter to go up on the mountain when he was transfigured. Jesus would later choose these three to go and pray with him in the Garden of Gethsemane. Maybe they thought, You know, Jesus already favors us; he's training us for positions of power.

But the difference is, Jesus had chosen them on those occasions; this time they were stepping forward on their own. They were asking for privilege and power. Jesus says, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" The image of God's cup in the Hebrew Bible was whatever God allots to men and women. Whatever God allows to happen, that comes from the cup of God.

Monty Williams is a former assistant coach for the Trailblazers, now an assistant for the Oklahoma City Thunder. I listened to his eulogy for his 44-year-old wife Ingrid on Friday. She was killed in a head-on collision this past week when another car swerved over into her lane. Both drivers were killed. She left behind her husband and five children. This Christian husband and father said in his eulogy, We don't have answers. But he claimed the promise of Romans 8:28: "We know that in all things God works together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose."

He didn't say God directed it; he didn't say God wanted this. But he claimed the promise that God would use this awful tragedy in their lives for good. Jesus said to James and John, Suffering is on the way. Do you think that you can drink that cup of suffering that is coming? I will be put to death, but God will take it and use it for the salvation of the world.

The other disciples heard this request from James and John, and they became angry, maybe because they hadn't said it first. So Jesus calls everybody together and says, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served, but to give his life a ransom for all." I came to do whatever it takes to bring this world back to God.

Jesus says, You see the models of greatness around you. You see how the Roman leaders dominate people. You see how the power of force controls people. That's not my kingdom. Greatness in my kingdom looks like service. It looks like a towel and a basin of water. You want to be great? Get on your knees and serve your neighbor. And yes, there will be suffering.

Suzanne Guthrie writes these words about suffering. "To be engaged with the world is to suffer. Even after the painful trauma of birth is over, a little child suffers the pains of the digestive system learning to manage itself; first teeth breaking slowly through the gums, the panic as mother incomprehensibly leaves the room even for a moment. In the best of economic and social circumstances, there is always sickness, tragedy, death, unexplainable twists of fate, love-sickness, home-sickness, hurtful disagreements, mental illness, the death of loved ones. Add

poverty, war, natural disasters, political oppression, and brutality and you have life. How can I bear this suffering?

Christians, who ritually embrace the suffering of Christ and the world in worship can nevertheless devolve into *Why did God do this to me? Why isn't God answering my prayers?* during a bout of suffering as if God is a personal necromancer and prayer a magical incantation. If I wallow in *Why did God do this to me?* I don't have to worry about someone half 'way around the world, or even down the street, for that matter.

But the moment my suffering meets your suffering, the moment our eyes meet, an alchemical change takes place. I am in you and you are in me. Suffering makes us one. Learning to suffer with you, I learn empathy for others I don't know. Suffering opens my soul to love.

And when my suffering meets God's suffering, we become one in that suffering, incarnate in the world, bearing this suffering for the Holy Unknowable. Christian practice helps me to trust living in the incomprehensible vortex of the cross. My suffering, your suffering, God's suffering, bringing forth new life. How can I bear this joy?"

Jesus says to James and John. Do you want to be great? Are you willing to suffer with me? Are you willing to serve until it hurts? Are you willing to carry a cross made just for you? We know that James was later beheaded, and John suffered for the sake of the Gospel. They did share the cup of suffering that was poured out in their lives.

This passage ends is bookended with another healing of a blind man. This time we know the name of the beggar. Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus, is sitting by the side of the road as Jesus walks by. Bartimaeus apparently has heard about Jesus. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. He is on his way to Passover. He's probably teaching along the way. People are eager to hear what he has to say.

And this blind man keeps yelling out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" The crowd tries to shut him up. Bart, we're trying to listen to Jesus. Hold it down! And he yells even louder, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Jesus hears the cries of Bartimaeus, and he stands still and says, "Call him here." They go over to the blind man, and say, "Take heart; get up. he's calling you."

And I love the blind man's reaction. "Throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus." That's a little dangerous for a blind man, isn't it? Springing up and hurrying over to somebody? But I love his attitude. Jesus is nearby, and is calling him. He is putting himself in position for healing. He is orienting himself so he can receive whatever Jesus has for him.

Jesus asks a question that should sound familiar to us. "What do you want me to do for you?" When James and John come to him with a request to give them whatever they ask, he asks them, "What do you want me to do for you?" Except these two requests are totally different, aren't they? James and John want positions of status. James and John want power. Bartimaeus wants mercy. That's what he asks for, right? Jesus, have mercy on me.

And Jesus asks him to be more specific. "What is it you want me to do for you?" What kind of mercy shall I offer? And Bartimaeus says, "My teacher, let me see again." Here's the thing: Bartimaeus doesn't quite have his theology down. He calls Jesus, Son of David. That's a royal term. He probably figures that if Jesus is the Messiah they've been waiting for, he will head down to Jerusalem and take on the Romans.

His theology isn't quite right, but much more important, he has faith. He knows that if he can position himself next to Jesus, something good will happen. And Jesus says, "Go, your faith has made you well." Not only does he regain his sight, but he follows Jesus on the way. In fact, maybe the reason we know his name, and his father's name, is because he became a follower of Jesus, and was known in Mark's community.

Let me venture this about the connection between faith and healing: Faith is not necessary for healing. Sometimes God simply heals people. Healing is in God's hands, it isn't simply a matter of how much faith we have. So what does faith do? Faith puts us in position to receive whatever God has for us. In faith, we hear the call of Jesus, and we throw off our cloak, and we spring up into his presence. And Jesus asks, What do you want me to do for you? And we can tell him what's on our heart. Maybe it's personal healing, or justice in the world, or healing for our blindness so we can be more like Jesus. Realize too that as Bartimaeus throws off his cloak and is healed by Jesus, he now follows him down to Jerusalem and to the place of the cross. He is learning that following Jesus is the way of the cross, and it doesn't look like success in this world.

There is a little known story about Luther towards the end of his life. He had travelled to Eisleben, his birthplace, to settle a dispute among local magistrates. While he was there, he preached in the local parish, and only five people showed up. He had spent almost his entire adult life working to reform the church, to educate, to inspire, to share the Gospel. He was not happy. And he wrote to a friend about the event, despairing about a “failed reformation.”

Jesus says, Do you want to follow me? There will be suffering. It sure won't look like the way the world defines success. We will be asked to serve people we might not like, to welcome the stranger who is different from us, to love people who are hard to love, and to discover that God takes all things, including our failures, and works them together for good.

So may God give us the strength this week to throw off the cloak, whatever is holding us back. May the hands of Christ touch our eyes and heal our spiritual blindness. And may we have the strength to follow in the way of Jesus, wherever that may lead us. Amen.