

Date: October 22, 2006

SUNDAY: Ordinary 29 (Ordinary 30 texts)

SERMON: To See Is To Follow

Text(s): Mark 10:46-52

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One of the heroines of the human spirit is Helen Keller, a woman whose life was the subject of the 1964 Pulitzer Prize-winning play, *The Miracle Worker*. Some of us got our first introduction to her life in elementary school. I don't know if school children still learn about Helen Keller; I hope they do. Probably no one did more to advance the cause of people with severe handicapping conditions in her time than she did. As a result of a severe brain fever at the age of 19 months, she was left blind and deaf, able to communicate only through violent rages and tantrums. (As the grandparent of a 17-month old toddler, I know something about tantrums that are the result of an inability to clearly communicate one's needs.) But through the patient work of a teacher, equally heroic, named Anne Sullivan, Helen Keller eventually learned to speak and to read Braille, and she embarked on a lifelong work of humanitarian writing and speaking on behalf of handicapped people everywhere.

Once, after speaking at a high school assembly and sharing her own experiences of being blind, a student came to shake her hand after the speech and said, "Miss Keller, it must be terrible not to have eyes to see with."

Helen Keller replied, "Oh no, my dear. What's really terrible is to have perfectly good eyes and still not be able to see."

St. Mark would have emphatically agreed with Helen Keller's response. One of the major themes, perhaps the most important theme that runs through his gospel, is the theme of sight and blindness. Mark is not the first person to use sight and blindness as metaphors for understanding or failure to understand; at least as far back as Plato's famous allegory of the cave in his *Republic*, seeing has frequently represented understanding and blindness has represented the

lack of it.

One of the rhetorical devices that Mark uses that the other gospel writers do not, is that he portrays the people closest to Jesus— his family and inner circle of disciples— as consistently failing to understand Jesus or his teachings. The people whom we, the readers, would most expect to be clear-sighted about Jesus are, in Mark's portrayal, "blind as bats."

The flip side of this rhetorical strategy is that the people in this gospel whom we would least expect to perceive and understand who Jesus is— an insane man, two blind men, a Roman centurion who's part of the crucifixion detail—in fact, are the people who do understand and who Jesus is and what it means to be a disciple. They are the ones who really see things clearly.

The story of blind Bartimaeus, which is our lesson today, is an important one in Mark's skillful use of the theme of blindness and sight. It's no accident that he places this story immediately after the one we considered last week, where Jesus' own disciples demonstrated how obtuse they are by arguing among themselves about which of them was going to be the greatest in the coming kingdom.

When we read that story, our first response is to laugh at these knuckleheads. How could they be so dense? Well, how can we? Aren't we often like Helen Keller's description of people who have eyes, but can't see? How long has it taken us to really come to grips with how deeply implicated we all are in the looming crisis of global warming? It's not like the scientists and prophets haven't been warning us for a long time. And for most of that time, we've been like ostriches with our heads in the sand, more concerned that the price of gas was going up than we were about the carbon dioxide emissions that were being produced by our cars. I'm glad our church is beginning to see the light in this regard. Just this past week the Prudential Committee, following our Earth Care Team's recommendation, decided to sign on to purchase

“Green power” for our church’s electrical needs.

The recent war in Lebanon between Israel and Hezbollah caused us to ask again how the Israeli and the Palestinian leaders can be so blind as not to see that their only hope of a future is to learn to live in peace with one another and to work toward some just agreements that will move them toward that goal. But perhaps we can’t be too hard on them since our own track record with futile wars is hardly a testimony to our clear-sighted thinking.

On a more personal level, how can that husband not see that his workaholicism and his consequent neglect of his family is going to cost him dearly one of these days? How can our friend not see that unless she owns up to her drinking problem and seeks help, she’s going to lose both her health and her family?

In all these situations and many more, we testify to the truth of Helen Keller’s insight that what is worse than having no eyes to see is having perfectly good eyes, but still not be able to see.

So now Mark tells us about a blind man who has no eyesight, but who nevertheless sees remarkably clearly. Jesus is passing through Jericho on his way to Jerusalem, and on the outskirts of town, along the route that Jesus must take, sits a blind beggar whose name is given simply as bar-Timaeus, son of Timaeus. Since there was usually a goodly number of people traveling up to Jerusalem for the purposes of religious pilgrimage, it was a good spot for a beggar to sit. When people are in a religious frame of mind, they’re inclined to be a little more generous than at other times, and so his begging bowl was likely to get a few more shekels thrown into it than at other places he could have sat.

But today there seems to be some added excitement in the crowds who travel this busy road. When he asks, someone tells him that the popular Galilean teacher and healer Jesus of Nazareth is passing by. He’s heard the gossip

about this fellow. He’s a prophet, he’s the messiah, he’s a revolutionary, he’s a miracle worker, he’s a nut-case, he’s— well, the rumor mill has been working overtime. For Bartimaeus, however, there’s more than just idle curiosity involved. He’s heard about this man’s ability to heal people, and more than anything else in the world, Bartimaeus wants to see.

So, when the crowd begins to buzz with anticipation because Jesus is approaching, Bartimaeus figures, “What have I got to lose?” and he begins shouting “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” It’s interesting, isn’t it, that the people around Bartimaeus, instead of supporting his cries for help, are thoroughly annoyed by the noise he’s making. So they ignore him, or try to silence him. “Quiet down there! Have a little respect! An important teacher can’t be bothered with a nobody like you?”

But Bartimaeus knows what he wants and what he needs, and he’s not about to let an opportunity slip by him because of other people’s blindness to reality. So he shouts all the louder, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.”

And Jesus stops, looks around to see where the commotion is coming from, and says, “Call him.” Well, the crowd immediately changes its tune. This is even better. Now maybe they’ll get to see this healer in action. This will be as much fun as a circus. So they tell Bartimaeus that Jesus wants to speak to him, and Bartimaeus springs up and stumbles out into the street and comes to Jesus.

And at this point, Mark offers us one of the strongest clues to help us understand the real meaning of this story. In the preceding story, where James and John came to Jesus with their request to be made Prime Minister and Secretary of State in the Kingdom, Jesus asked them, “*What do you want me to do for you?*” Their answer to that question revealed their blindness to the truth of what Jesus was really all about. Now, here, in response to the desperation of a

blind beggar, Jesus asks precisely the same question, “*What do you want me to do for you?*” Same question, but what a different answer! Unlike James and John, Bartimaeus’s answer reveals him as a person whose eyesight may be absent, but whose insight is 20/20. “*Sir,*” he says, “*I want to see.*”

And Jesus’ response to him confirms this. “*Go your way, your faith has saved you.*” Not, your faith has given you back your eyesight, but your faith has saved you. The word Mark uses here, while it can simply mean “made well” or “made whole,” is the same word used elsewhere throughout the New Testament for salvation as Christians understood it. I cannot believe that Mark didn’t choose it very deliberately. Salvation is wholeness—every aspect of our lives and our relationships restored to the well-being of God’s creative intent. Along with the restoration of Bartimaeus’s physical eyesight also came spiritual insight that led to a new understanding of the meaning of his life and an end to the alienation he experienced as a blind beggar. As soon as his sight is restored, his whole life is transformed. “*And immediately, he regained his sight and followed Jesus on the way.*” To see is to follow.

Following Jesus, Bartimaeus became part of a new community, a community of those who were “on the way” with Jesus, which in Mark’s usage always means the way of self-denying servanthood, the way of the cross. It is Bartimaeus, the blind beggar along the roadside, who in Mark’s story, is the first person to really see and perceive what following Jesus really means. It is Bartimaeus who is the first one who understands that to follow Jesus means taking the road of servanthood, of sacrifice, of self-giving, rather than the road of success, of self-interest.

Bartimaeus thought his greatest need was to have his eyesight restored, and he let nothing keep him from an encounter with the one whom he believed could help him. What he got was something more than mere eyesight— he received

spiritual insight that gave him a new vocation, a new community of relationships, a new purpose and direction for his life. And isn’t that the deepest need for all of us, though we may not always realize it? Isn’t our drive to acquire possessions or to climb the ladder of social status or position in our jobs, really an expression of our need for meaning, for purpose? So much of what we spend our time and energy on is really an almost frantic attempt to find some higher meaning for our lives, to find that total sense of well-being and harmony within ourselves and in our relationships with others— a quest to be saved, to be made whole.

So the story of Bartimaeus becomes a parable for our time, and we find ourselves confronted by a choice to remain blind— to follow the way of the conventional wisdom, the prevailing cultural values, living for self-centered interests, materialistic goals, trusting the illusions of security that the Dow-Jones or the S&P 500 offer us— or to follow Jesus on the way of the cross. I like the way Henri Nouwen once put it, “We are called to follow Jesus on the road of downward mobility in the midst of a world of upward mobility.” To see is to follow. To follow commits us to a particular road that has a particular shape and a particular destination. To be a disciple means committing ourselves to a cross-shaped life, a life lived for others. That path will often put us at odds with the ways and values of the society around us. And sometimes, the way may seem hard and the outcome hidden from our eyes. At those times, we will learn the truth of St. Paul’s statement that *we walk by faith and not by sight.*” But such faithful walking will be its own reward, and in the company of others of like faith, which is also to say, in company with Christ himself, we will discover that the way of the cross doesn’t end at the cross, but goes beyond to an empty tomb and to a life that is beyond life.