

So when I was a baby priest in Altoona, I was visiting a parishioner in the hospital. The woman in the bed next to her said, "Are you a minister or something?" "Yes, ma'am." "Would you pray over me too? I'm not Catholic or anything." "Sure, I'll be happy to. What would you like me to pray for?" She looked at me as though I'd lost my marbles and said rather curtly, "That I'll be healed, of course!" And so I took her hands, prayed the prayers of anointing of the sick, and anointed her. When I had finished praying, the woman began to stretch in the bed a bit. "You know, I feel kind of strange. In fact, I feel pretty good!" she said, throwing off the covers. She got out of bed, began to jump up and down, and started shouting, "I'm healed! I'm healed! Thank you, reverend, thank you Jesus!" I was a little taken back, tried to keep my composure, and shakingly slunk back to my car, where I bowed my head and prayed, "Dear God, don't EVER do that to me again!"

Today's healing of the blind Bartimaeus functions as the second in a pair of bookends that define the way to Jerusalem. The first bookend, the slow, step-by-step healing of an unnamed blind man, occurs at the beginning of Jesus' journey toward Jerusalem. The other bookend is the story of the instantaneous healing of Bartimaeus, which occurs at the end of the journey to Jerusalem. Sandwiched between these bookends are variations on the theme of the disciples' blindness on the way, the difficult gospels that we have had to deal with the last several Sundays, which I didn't like, and from the comments I got from some of you, you didn't like either! Maybe they just hit too close to home. Remember – I'm just the messenger – NOT the message – and I struggle with all of this too.

The disciples in the gospel were given the opportunity to see, but they were blind to the mission of Jesus. We have been asked, these last several weeks, to raise questions concerning the blind spots that exist in each of our own lives as well. It's not fun stuff, but it is the only way to an enlightened and deepened faith.

The Biblical expert, Ched Myers, wrote a wonderfully provocative commentary on Mark's gospel called *BINDING THE STRONG MAN*, which is a reference to Mark 3:27, where Jesus responds to accusations from the scribes that He is working with Satan. Jesus argues that His victories are the result of binding the 'strong man,' who is Satan, which would be one of the main lenses through which to read this gospel – Jesus overcoming the power of Satan in the world. In that commentary, Myers suggests that Bartimaeus represents a contrast – the difference between the discipleship he displays and the nondiscipleship of the rich man of the gospel 2 weeks ago. Bartimaeus encounters Jesus 'on the way.' So did the rich man. The rich man could not let go of his material possessions. Bartimaeus throws away his garment, his only means of support. Beggars spread out their garments on the ground, which were used for gathering alms. It was also his bed at night, and his only possession. The one who belonged to the higher social class rejected a direct invitation from Jesus to follow Him. The one at the bottom of society's social order did not even wait for the invitation in the first place. He jumped up, gave up all, and was ready to follow Jesus 'on the way.'

My second point (see we're already 1/3 of the way through!) is the invitation that the scripture offers each of us – "What do you want me to do for you?" It is both an invitation and a promise, for the bony Man of Nazareth invites us to believe -- while promising that sincere faith never goes unanswered. As in the life of Bartimaeus, Jesus' question can prove to be a turning point for those who allow Him to answer their needs with healing. Have we the courage to follow Bartimaeus' lead and cry out, "I want to see!" Have we the courage to acknowledge and admit to the many and varied blindnesses that prevent our seeing and faithfully following of Jesus?

Some of us are blind to our own faults and failures, choosing instead to focus on the weaknesses of others....Lord, I want to see. Some of us are blind to our many blessings and do not tithe, and begrudgingly support the church and charities.....Lord, I want to see. Some among us are so blinded by our pursuit of stuff, comfort and pleasure that we fail to notice and attend to the needs of others....Lord, I want to see. Some turn a blind eye to the poor, overlooking their plight while continuing to buy and amass more and more....Lord, I want to see. Certain eyes have been darkened by prejudice, failing to recognize and respect those of other races, gender, ethnicity, social status....Lord, I want to see. Some are blinded by an ambition that discounts the rights of others and belittles their achievements....Lord, I want to see. Pride blinds others of us and prevents us from standing humbly and in truth before God and listening to these challenging words....Lord, I want to see. Some among us are blinded by a self-importance and are unwilling to face that fact that someday we will have to render an account for our stewardship...Lord, I want to see. Some are so blinded by our self-imagined worth and the weightiness of our opinions that we fail to see and appreciate the ideas of others or to listen to the teachings of the church....Lord, I want to see. Whatever the source or cause of our blindnesses, the experience of Bartimaeus assures us that healing is possible if our request 'I want to see' is sincere, fueled by faith and followed by a renewed commitment to following Jesus up whatever road He leads us. (adapted from Patricia Datchuck Sanchez, in CELEBRATION, Oct 29, 2000, p. 465)

And third and finally, if we are willing to look at our blindnesses, then what do we really want to see? What do we really want and desire in our heart of hearts?

C.S. Lewis, in his eloquent EVENSONG sermon at Oxford on June 8, 1941, put it like this: "Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospel, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are halfhearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition and money when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at sea. We are far too easily pleased." (THE WEIGHT OF GLORY, Walter Hooper, ed., p. 26)

We are easily fooled and misled by mere appearances, by all that glitters, by all that is impressive and new. Bartimaeus comes to SEE, the question becomes, do we?

Make no mistake about it. We may well wish that the healing stories did not have this kind of deeper, parabolic, dynamic. Too often, what we want from God is just a plain old dazzling healing or miracle. But what we get is Bartimaeus, and a whole slew of questions about our own blindnesses and what we really want deep down in our heart of hearts. That question must be coupled with the question about our blindnesses, that is, WHAT DO WE REALLY WANT?

It is no easy task to live in our culture and find peace. Inside of us, it seems that something is always at odds with the very rhythm of things – which leaves us forever dissatisfied, frustrated, restless. We are so filled with desire that is hard to come to simple rest. Desire is always stronger than our satisfaction.

But this is by the Creator's design. Desire lies at the center of our lives, in the marrow of our bones. We are not peaceful beings who occasionally get restless, we are driven persons, forever obsessed, only occasionally experiencing peace. Desire is the straw that stirs the pot of life.

At the heart of all great literature, poetry, art, philosophy, AND religion lies the naming and analyzing of this desire. It is at the heart of the cure of one blind man. Desire intrigues us, stirs the soul. We love stories about desire – tales of love, sex, wanderlust, haunting nostalgia, boundless ambition, the all-embracing ache which lies at the center of human experience and is the ultimate force that drives everything else. This

desire is universal, but it does admit to different moods and faces. Sometimes it hits us as pain – dissatisfaction, frustration, and aching. At other times its grip is not felt as painful at all, but as a deep energy, as something beautiful, as a mysterious pull, more important than anything else inside us, moving us toward love, beauty, creativity, and a future beyond our limited present. Desire can show itself as aching pain or delicious hope. Our life is ultimately about what we do with this desire.

We see then why Mark remembered this simply fascinating story about a man who first admitted his blindness, so that he could name his desire, and his encounter with Jesus, the only one in the universe who could ultimately satisfy it.

Once we have accepted that we, too are blind, then we can move on to the next step – the desire of our hearts. What is it that YOU seek? May we find the fulfillment of our desire in Jesus, the Desire of our hearts. (help from THE HOLY LONGING, Ronald Rolheiser, p. 3-5)

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