

23 Pentecost, Proper 25, Yr. B  
October 28, 2018  
Mark 10:46-52

You may remember that several weeks ago I said that this whole section of Mark's Gospel was sandwiched between two stories of blind men. The first one was the blind man whose cure didn't work the first time, so Jesus had to try again. Today's reading is about Bartimaeus, whose cure worked on two levels. On the physical level, he could see. On the spiritual level, he could understand who Jesus was and what he was called to do and so "he followed him on the way." In between these two stories are various stories of blindness. The disciples, of course, who often seem to be stumbling around in spiritual darkness. But others as well: there was the rich young man, who asked Jesus what he had to do to gain eternal life. When he was told to get rid of his wealth, he couldn't do it. And then there were James and John, who misunderstood the whole Jesus thing and thought it was all about honor and glory; they wanted those power seats.

So, blindness. Physical, yes, but more importantly, spiritual. That's what I'd like to focus on this morning. But there's something else, which I'd like to point out and then ask you to hold "in reserve." And that's the question, in all three of the scriptures I just mentioned – the question of what we want Jesus to do for us.

First, blindness. And sight, sight in the sense of understanding: understanding who God is, who Jesus is, who we are, what we're called to be.

Each of us is standing in a particular time, a particular place, a particular culture. Each of us has our own history and, more importantly, each of us has our own way of understanding the world. You could say that each of us has our own story, a story that makes sense of the world and our experience. That story is our frame of reference. Those stories are essential for us to function in the world. But they also limit our understanding of the world, because like any frame, some things are left out of the picture.

If we back way up, we'll see what are called meta-narratives, or overarching stories. These are stories on the macro level; stories, for instance about the original creation. It's worth noting here that the Judeo-Christian creation story is one of a good Creator, with loving intent. There are other stories about creation: the Babylonian myth is about violence, with one god cutting up another and flinging the parts out to make the various planets. Or the gnostic story, which is that some lesser god, with evil intent, created this world and our goal is to get out of it because everything created is bad. As you can easily tell, it makes a big difference which one of those stories you subscribe to. Our creation story tells us that, as Fred Rogers said in the film we watched, everyone is created in God's image, everyone has inherent value, everyone is loved and to be loved. Jesus lives out that story in living color, loving, healing, forgiving, reconciling, coming, he says, not to be served, but to serve, coming to bring abundant life to everyone and everything. That's our overarching story.

But each of us has our own personal story about how the world works and how we fit in. And, just like those creation narratives, we choose our more personal stories as well. This was brought home to me when I was still practicing law and went to a Lifesprings seminar. Lifesprings was an offshoot of EST. I guess you could call them self-realization and self-actualization seminars. One of the exercises was about the stories we told about our lives. In the exercise, you were in a small group of people and you had to tell your story, but you had to tell it twice. The first time you had to tell it as though you were a victim, put-upon, misunderstood. And you had to tell it so convincingly that you pretty much brought your group to tears. Fine. But then you had to tell it again and this time, you told it as though you were born with a silver spoon in your mouth, all the good things you'd received, all your blessings, all the advantages you'd had. And the revealing thing about this was that you really COULD tell your story both ways, it was your choice what you wanted to focus on and how you wanted to interpret each thing that had happened to you. The exercise was revealing in that way, but also because it made you realize that you WERE telling a story and that the one you were telling could be told differently.

How you tell the story will guide how you understand your life, your gifts and your call.

This past week a number of us attended the Focus on Fairness talk given by Chuck Collins. I think I mentioned last week that he was the heir to the Oscar Mayer fortune and gave it all away when he was 26. He's now a senior scholar at the Institute for Policy Studies and income inequality and the damage it's doing to our society is his focus. He talked about stories.

One of things he said is that we're good, in this country, at lauding the individual and, rightly, celebrating an individual's success. But he went on to say that often individuals who have succeeded have a story that says, I DID THIS ON MY OWN and therefore, it's mine to keep, to do with what I will, with no obligation to the wider society. In the course of his talk he told a couple of powerful stories. The first was about a fellow named Martin Rothenberg who owned several tech companies. He had been born to a poor family, but he pointed out that along the way he had received incredible amounts of help: great public schools, excellent teachers, a local library that was open evenings and weekends with a librarian who was interested and helpful, the GI bill which paid for his college education, a fellowship program which paid for graduate school. And then a high tech career which benefited from years of public investment in research and technology infrastructure. He formed a private company that was founded on a platform of publicly funded research. And then, he said, when he needed the right employees, he found them in universities which had, in effect, trained them for him. I DID NOT DO THIS ALONE, he said, NOBODY DOES.

Another story Collins told was about a fellow named Hank who had been a high-level executive with Boeing. After his retirement, Hank, who had originally been trained as an engineer, went on a trip to Kenya where he was involved in helping to install clean water systems in rural villages. He said that everyday there were a bunch of kids who would hang out and watch what was happening, like "we were the best entertainment in town." After a while, he got to know some of them and asked them where they lived. "The orphanage," was the answer. They took him to see it – it was

an old, small, sagging building. When he talked with the director and asked if he could do something to help, they welcomed his help and told him that there were many more kids in the area, but they had no more room. Some of those kids were living on the streets, some had been sold into slavery. Hank said that he went back to his luxury hotel room and began to cry. "There was no story that I could construct," he said, "that could justify the gap in how I was living and how these kids were living. It cracked open my heart." Hank went back to LA and started raising money, the end result of which was, as you've guessed, a new orphanage and new resources for these kids.

These scriptures are challenging. And they leave us, I think, with some powerful questions. The first one is **WHAT STORY AM I TELLING?** Is it about scarcity or abundance? About independence or interdependence? Fellow humans as threatening competitors to be feared or brothers and sisters to be cared for? The second is **IS IT POSSIBLE FOR ME TO UNDERSTAND MY LIFE AND MY EXPERIENCE VIA A DIFFERENT STORY?** And the third thing is somewhat different. I mentioned that in all these Gospel stories, Jesus is asking a question: **WHAT DO YOU WANT ME TO DO FOR YOU?** I'd like to suggest that sometime over the next few days, in conversation or in prayer, you imagine yourself standing before Jesus and hear Jesus asking you that question: **WHAT DO YOU WANT ME TO DO FOR YOU?** If we answer that question as honestly as we can, I think we'll receive graced enlightenment.

Amen.