Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle B

St. Mary’s in Riverside, 2021

A number of years ago

I ran across a quite short yet interesting list

which reminded me that

things are not always what they seem.

That list noted that

A firefly is not a fly – it’s a beetle.

A prairie dog is not a dog – it’s a rodent.

A Douglas fir tree is not a fir – it’s a pine.

A banana tree is not a tree – it’s an herb.

A horned toad is not a toad – it’s a lizard

And an English horn is not English and not a horn –

It’s an alto oboe that originated in Silesia.

In that same contradictory vein

I would like to suggest that the gospel we hear today

With echoes in that first reading from Jeremiah

Is not really a miracle or a healing story

But rather a vocational narrative

Offering ancient wisdom

about the true path to discipleship.

It also is a sharp corrective to those

who might think they have the discipleship gig

down pat or securely in hand.

While Mark’s gospel is not always held up

As a great piece of literature

Mark cleverly constructs a telling sequence of events

Here in the middle of his narrative,

That culminates with the healing of the blind man in Jericho.[[1]](#endnote-1)

In order to understand Mark’s literary inventiveness

We have to reach back to the 8th chapter of Mark

In which the evangelist relates a first tale

Of Jesus curing a blind man

This time at Bethsaida.

In that story, Jesus takes the blind man by the hand

Leads to the edge of the village

Puts spittle on his eyes and his hands on his head

Finally laying his hands on the man’s eyes

And he is cured.

Then Mark takes us on a romp through discipleship

With Peter’s profession of faith

Followed by Peter being rebuked by Jesus

And actually called Satan by the Son of God.

Then there is the tale of the disciples

Arguing amongst themselves about who is the greatest.

Followed by a tale of apostolic outrage

Because someone outside their circle

was casting out demons … what impertinence

A few verses later there is the presumptuous tale

Of two disciples, James and John, the sons Zebedee

Actually requesting that Jesus place them

At his right and left hand in glory

presumably enhancing their positions

In the current apostolic pecking order.

Interspersed between these tales,

That caricature hand chosen disciples

As spiritual dunderheads, even buffoons,

Are multiple instructions from the Lord

About conditions for following Christ

An inclusive image of discipleship

And leadership as service not as power or prominence.

Today’s healing story

That serves as a bookend to this section of the gospel

Paralleling the healing of the blind man at Bethsaida

Is Mark’s capstone on two chapters of vocational commentary.

Positioned right before Jesus enters Jerusalem

On a collision course with suffering and death

The evangelist presents what at first glance

Looks like a healing story.

Digging into the text, however,

We discover that it is really a wisdom tale

About true discipleship and every vocation in Christ.

The most obvious clue to the true nature of this tale

Lies in the question Jesus asks the blind man:

“What do you want me to do for you.”

A question virtually identical

To the one Jesus posed to the Sons of Zebedee

In the previous chapter.

To that prompt, the disciples James and John

Requested privilege, a very high place in God’s reign

Being seated and Jesus’ right and left in glory.

And what did the blind man want?

He wanted to see.

In many languages, including English

To see not only indicates a capacity for physical sight

But the ability to understand, to perceive the truth

To be enlightened.

When you surround this gospel dialogue

With the evidence that this blind man

Was unstoppable in shouting at the top of his lungs

For Jesus to show him mercy

That in his blindness Jesus requires

The almost laughable feat

Of the blind man coming to Jesus

Rather than the Lord moving to him

And then that dramatic detail of the man

Throwing off his cloak

Probably the only thing he owned

Throwing off his source of protection

His source of comfort and warmth

His primary worldly possession

We begin to “see” that this is the true disciple

Jumping up and moving toward Jesus

Divested of his worldly commitments

Gifted in God’s mercy

With the capacity to perceive the Christ

And metaphorically putting chosen disciples to shame

Who over the past few chapters of Mark

Have revealed themselves as thoroughly incapable

Of perceiving the true nature of Jesus

And his death-defying ministry.

There is a celebrated neuroscientist and expert in perception

By the name of Dr. Beau Lotto

His most recent book on his work is entitled

*Deviate: The Science of Seeing Differently*[[2]](#endnote-2)

But you can get a quick overview

Of his disruptive approach to perception

By watching one of his TED talks.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Through a series of mind-boggling experiments

Lotto demonstrates that

The brain evolves not to see the world the way it is

But to see the world in ways that have been useful …

But context changes, life changes, the world changes

And our very plastic brains can help us see the world anew

But that is only done by deviating from norms of perception

By stepping into uncertainty

By practicing active doubt.

Lotto believes that

“doubt with courage and your brain will reward you for it through the new perceptions this process opens up. To question one’s assumptions, especially those that define ourselves, requires knowing that [we] don’t see The reality – only [our] minds version of reality – and … accepting the possibility that someone else might know better.”[[4]](#endnote-4)

Bartimaeus – the blind man of Jericho

In begging for mercy

In wanting to see

Metaphorically announced that his previous assumptions

About God

About salvation

About any messiah

Were now under question

Thrown off like an old cloak

In the quest for new eyes

In the radical experiment, as St. Paul would phrase it,

Of “putting on … clothing oneself in Christ” (Rom 13:14)

When that happens

We are changed from the inside out

Free to deviate from societal norms

That judge people by color, or sexual orientation or faith

And instead, see them with Christ eyes.

Recently I learned about the Decameron Project[[5]](#endnote-5)

Inspired by the mythical tale of 10 young people

Who in the 14th century attempted to escape the plague

By sheltering in a villa outside of Florence

And passing their time by weaving stories and telling tales.

The contemporary Decameron project

Emerged in the midst of the current pandemic

Founded by young people for their peers

And inviting a return to storytelling

As an antidote to oppressive isolation

Deploying these fresh voices as healing gifts.

Middle Schooler Grace Volz recently crafted a story

Entitled “Seeing Differently.”[[6]](#endnote-6)

In this autobiographical tale

Grace ponders her incredibly bad eyesight,

Noting that when friends try to put on her glasses

They inevitably say something like

“wow Grace, you’re really blind!”

This short vignette celebrates the gift of glasses

Or what she calls windows …

A story her mother often repeats at her prompting

Is about the day she got her first pair of glasses as a child.

Mom said, “your face seemed to light up,

Seeing the whole world as I see it,

You never took them off!”

But then this middle schooler muses

About taking off her glasses from time to time

To see things in a different way.

She writes: [with the glasses off]

Not being able to see faces gives me a way to just see their personality first. Just to focus on the most important thing about a person is truly a gift, I don’t get sidetracked by someone’s appearance like their clothes, or their looks, or even their size. Ever since the 2016 election, I realized that I have to fight for what I believe in and hold the people that also care about those issues close to me. I think I had to finally accept others’ differences to stay strong and I couldn’t do that without knowing who they actually are first. Listening, I continue to hear others’ stories of hardships and injustices to better understand and connect with them.

When I put on my glasses I’m able to see what everyone else sees, the person that everyone recognizes. I admire both sides of someone, I connect the dots to their true selves and their appearance. I see who someone really is deep down and I can finally put someone else’s shoes on.”

I wonder if her middle name is Bartimaeus

Or if she is a long lost relative of the blind man from Jericho.

Like many others, the American Poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Has mused on the Bartimaean metaphor.

The closing stanza of this verse summons us all:

*Ye that have eyes, yet cannot see,  
In darkness and in misery,  
Recall those mighty Voices Three,  
"Jesus, have, mercy now on me!  
Fear not, arise, and go in peace!  
Thy faith from blindness gives release!”*

So may our faith give us relief

From the blindness, the prejudice, the judgmentalism

That clouds our sight

So that we might see through Christ-Eyes

For our good, and the good of all the world

Through Christ our Lord.

1. See the succinct commentary by Dennis Hamm at <https://liturgy.sluhostedsites.org/30OrdB102421/theword_hamm.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Beau Lotto, *Deviate: The Science of Seeing Differently* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2017). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.ted.com/talks/beau_lotto_optical_illusions_show_how_we_see/transcript?language=en> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. *Deviate,* pp. 11-12. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. <https://decameronproject.org/mission/> [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. <https://decameronproject.org/stories/seeing-differently/> [↑](#endnote-ref-6)