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)