

Seeing and Being Seen

Mark 10:46-52

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On the first day of third grade, I was thrilled to discover that my assigned seat was on the back row. If there had been a lottery in the third grade (and I had had any concept at all at nine-years old of what a lottery was), I would have felt like I had just hit the jackpot.

I remember being giddy with excitement. Think of all the shenanigans I could get into back there! I'd never had a desk on the back row, but I knew what happened back there. Kids on the back row passed notes and threw paper airplanes. They shot spit wads through straws and ate glue when the teacher wasn't looking. That's what happened on the back row – all of the fun stuff.

But before I could even pass a single note or throw a single paper airplane, I lost my spot on the back row.

I was always a good student, but only a few weeks into third grade my grades had started slipping. One day, my teacher, Mrs. Gredvig, pulled me aside. She knew me and knew I could do better. She tried to help me correct it. "Daniel, you seem distracted in class. You never raise your hand or participate anymore. You don't want to fall behind, do you? So try to focus. Try to pay attention. Give a little more effort."

I took her words to heart. I tried harder. From my seat in the back row of the classroom, I watched every move Mrs. Gredvig made. If she was speaking, I was silent. If she was teaching I was paying attention... at least most of the time. But the blackboard was so far away and the back row kids were always doodling in their notebooks and I wanted to doodle, too, and the windows to the world outside were right behind me and there was always something fun going on out there... So I struggled to stay focused and my grades continued to slip.

A week or so went by before Mrs. Gredvig decided to change tactics. At the start of class, she came to my desk and told me to pack up my things. She told me I would be switching desks with one of the students on the front row.

Frankly, I was devastated. So much for the shenanigans and the tomfoolery I had planned for the year. Now I'd be sitting right under Mrs. Gredvig's nose all day long. I was utterly embarrassed, too. I could feel everyone else's eyes on me as I was forced against my will to move my pencil box and my notebooks and my Trapper-keeper to a desk on the front row.

In 1987, Judith Viorst wrote a children's book entitled, "Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day." On that morning, I resonated with Alexander a very personal level.

I plopped myself down in my new chair, and Mrs. Gredvig started teaching a math lesson about basic multiplication. As she taught, I let out a deep sigh and I began resigning myself to my punishment. When it came time to answer the first problem on the board, I begrudgingly raised my hand. Mrs. Gredvig called on me. I got it correct, and Mrs. Gredvig smiled at me with one of those smiles that told me she was proud of me. And I thought to myself, "Ok. Maybe the front row isn't so bad."

It was only later that I learned that Mrs. Gredvig had moved me from the back row to the front *not* because of behavior problems, but because she had come to suspect that I was having *vision* problems. She'd noticed that all of the homework I turned in came back just fine, but that I had kept giving incorrect answers or not even participating when she taught from the front of the room. So unbeknownst to me, she was conducting an experiment to test my vision.

After a single day on the front row, Mrs. Gredvig called my parents to tell them her suspicions.

She was right. It turned out that my eyesight was terrible. "Legally blind" is defined as having 20/200 vision or worse — which basically means that to clearly see an object that a person with normal vision could see from 200 feet away, you would have to be 20 feet or closer. When I got my eyes tested my vision in third grade wasn't 20/200, but closer to 20/400. It was more than twice as bad as the standard for being legally blind. So, at nine-years old, I got my first pair of glasses.

It's funny how things changed overnight once I could see. Before getting glasses, I had zero interest in sports. If you are one of those fortunate people who has normal vision, you cannot possibly imagine how terrifying it is to play catch with a baseball when you can't see the ball until it's inches from your face. But that summer, after I got glasses, I joined little league for the first time. I played soccer. I even took up archery. And to my mom's delight, I stopped sitting so close to the TV. Being able to see changed my life.

I have spent a lot of time this week wondering how different my life would have been if I had been born in the day and time of Jesus. No modern medicine. No optometrist or vision insurance. No glasses. No contact lenses. Just being legally blind and learning to live with it.

Would I have found myself next to Bartimaeus on that road outside of Jericho? Would I have been forced to beg, forced to depend on the mercy of others for food? Would I have a home of my own? A bed of my own? A family that loved me and took care of me? Christen as as close to a saint as I've ever known, but would she have ever even gone on a first date with me if I was a blind beggar?

It was just a few days before Passover. If you had to beg for a living, Passover was an opportune time to sit on the side of the road and do so, because caravans of faithful Jews were making their way to Jerusalem from all over for the festival.

Being only fifteen miles from the Holy City, Jericho was a logical and convenient stop along the way. Even more, it was an attractive stop, because in that day and time Jericho was a rich and flourishing city, full of trade and known for its streets lined with palm trees.

On that day, blind Bartimaeus wrapped in his cloak, took his spot on the edge of the road just outside the gates of Jericho. In a rich, beautiful city, he was a poor, blind beggar.

He sat there for a while, holding out his empty tin cup, hoping someone, anyone would notice him and drop a few dollars in. He'd learned from experience that they didn't like it if he made a scene. That rubbed against the acceptable practices for beggars like him. The name of the game was that he'd be tolerated as long as he didn't become too loud.

So rather than call out with his voice, he'd drop a couple coins in the bottom of his tin cup and shake it. The clinking might get their attention, get them to look in his direction, get them to maybe notice him — maybe notice that he's a person, too.

That's the deep irony of being a blind beggar: not only can you not see, but it sure feels like no one sees you, either. You can't see and you aren't seen. The world is invisible to you, and you seem to be invisible to it.

There are lots of people in the world who aren't invisible, but who we pretend are, aren't there? The panhandler on the corner. The person who removes the dishes from your table at the restaurant. The person who cleans your church. You know, it's hard to have any sense of self-worth when it seems like no one sees you.

That's when someone nearly tripped over Bartimaeus on the ground. "Sorry," they shouted over their shoulder. "Just trying to catch sight of Jesus."

"Who?"

"Jesus! You know — of Nazareth."

Bartimaeus couldn't believe it! Jesus was here? He'd heard about Jesus healing a blind man over in Bethsaida. Could Jesus, would Jesus do the same for him?

Jesus wasn't going hear him shaking the coins in his cup. He was going to have to do something more to get his attention. So, from the ground where he sat, Bartimaeus began shouting, "Jesus, Son of David! Have mercy on me!"

The crowds shushed him. "Be quiet," they said. "Don't you know that Jesus has more important things to do than deal with you?"

But Bartimaeus shouted even louder, "Son of David! Have mercy on me!"

It's unclear whether it was the volume of his cries, the desperation in his voice, or the words of his plea, but Jesus stopped in his tracks. He said, "Call him here."

The same crowd that was just telling Bartimaeus to shut up changed their tune real quick: "Take heart! Get up, he is calling you!"

"Me?!" Bartimaeus sprang up, threw off his cloak, and came to Jesus.

Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?"

"My teacher," he said. "Let me see again."

"Go," said Jesus, "your faith has made you well."

And as so often happens when Jesus gets involved, light penetrated the darkness and Bartimaeus could see again.

I think it's great that this story happens at Jericho of all places – Jericho whose walls fell when the people cried out. You remember the story from the book of Joshua, don't you? For six straight days no one was allowed to utter a single word – not until the seventh day. But then on the seventh day, at just the right moment, Joshua gave the sign, and they blew their horns and they cried out with all their might, and the LORD heard their cry and the walls came "a tumblin'" down.

And here once again, outside the gates of Jericho, someone cries out to the Lord with all his might – and, once again, the Lord hears his cry.

The end result was that Bartimaeus could see again. But, you know, seeing can be hard.

Several years ago now, a writer named Robert Kurson wrote a book entitled "Crashing Through." The book examined the life of Mike May, who underwent a revolutionary stem-cell transplant surgery to restore his vision, which he'd lost in an accident as a very young boy.

Kurson said that the inspiration from the book came to him one sleepless night. He says, "I was tossing and turning in my bed at about three in the morning, and came up with this question, which was: what is the single greatest human experience possible? What's the single greatest thing that could happen to a person?"

And I tossed around various possibilities. Was it a night of romance with Charlize Theron? Was it the most magnificent steak dinner cooked by the world's greatest chef? Or a night of listening to Mozart under the stars at the Ravinia Music Festival in Chicago?"

He says that's when he came to a conclusion. He decided that the single greatest human experience possible had to be the moment that a person who'd been blind for life opened his or her eyes and could see for the first time.

"That seemed to me the single greatest thing that could happen to a human being. So I began to research and discovered that it was much different than what I thought. When I did the research originally, I discovered that there were fewer than 20 cases known to all of history, going back to ancient times, in which a person lived a life blind and then gained vision. And astonishingly, in every one of those cases, there seemed to be a profound and deep depression among the people who regained their vision.

There were reports of clawing at the eyes, suicide attempts, fury at the surgeons who cured them. And in the most prolific of cases, there was an early death when the person seemed so disappointed in the visual world and so disappointed in the results that he simply seemed to just give up and die. So it was much different than I had expected" ("Crashing through' from blindness to sight, *Talk of the Nation*, March 24, 2007).

Why is that? Why is it that what we might assume would be the most glorious experience possible actually leads to agony, disappointment, and depression?

I think it's because seeing can be hard. It just isn't possible for the eye to see beauty alone. It takes in what is before it: not just the beautiful things, but the ugly things, too. The tragic things. The horrific things.

Our world is beautiful and terrible, so seeing can be hard. And that can be especially true if we dare to see ourselves as we actually are, too.

You know, the healing of Blind Bartimaeus is the last healing story in the gospel of Mark. In fact, there are fourteen different healing stories in Mark's gospel. So why would this story be set as the capstone of Jesus' healings in Mark? Why would it get the place of honor as the last of Jesus' healings?

I think it's because of one little phrase right at the close of the story that we often ignore: "*and [he] followed him on the way*" (10:52).

Bartimaeus wasn't just healed. He became a disciple. He "followed him on the way." Thirteen healing stories before this one in the gospel of Mark, and this is the first time where the person healed immediately followed Jesus.

Regaining his sight surely changed Bartimaeus' life, but I suspect the real transformation that happened in Bartimaeus that day began before he ever got his sight back. I think it happened the moment Jesus stopped and said "Call him here." It happened the moment that Jesus made some who was invisible feel *seen*.

What did Bartimaeus do when Jesus called him? He threw off his cloak, which is a wonderful metaphor for throwing off his old life in pursuit of something new.

That's the power of being seen — of being recognized as human, of having your dignity restored so that you can finally feel fully human. Bob Utley says, "Salvation is the restoration of the image of God in our lives." What Jesus did in seeing Bartimaeus was nothing less than restore the image of God in his life.

The NRSV translates Jesus' words as: "Go. Your faith has *made you well.*" But the Greek word here is *sōzō*. It can mean "to be made well," but it can also have another meaning: "to save" — as in "Your faith has *saved you.*" His faith did more than "make him well," than give him his sight back. It saved him.

That is the power of being seen by Jesus, who sees us as we are, but refuses to leave us there.

After I got my first pair of eyeglasses, Mrs. Gredvig gave me the option of swapping seats and reclaiming my spot back on the back row. But I just couldn't shake that moment when I was first moved up to the front row and got that answer correct and Mrs. Gredvig looked at me with such pride. In the moment, I felt like she saw in me what I could be — what I had it in me to be. And so I chose to stay on the front row and see if I couldn't start to see what she saw.

That's how it is with Jesus. He sees what we have it in us to be, and saves us from our blindness so that we might just start to see it for ourselves.

Amen.

Benediction: (Chuck Poole)

*Now, by the grace, goodness, and power of God,
May we limp across the rugged terrain of our lives,
until the limping becomes its own dancing,
because God is at work to make us strong,
even and especially in our broken places.
Amen.*