

If you google “Bartimaeus” you will see there are lots of inspirational articles, commentaries, and sermons about the event in today’s Gospel. In addition to the sheer volume of articles, there are several songs that have been written about this fellow who called to Jesus in a crowd. One thing that bothers about these songs, articles, commentaries, and sermons is that most of them refer to the man Jesus healed as “Blind Bartimaeus”. I guess I struggle with labeling a person based on a physical disability, especially because the story ends with him being able to see and followed Jesus, which I believe is the most important part of today’s Gospel.

This makes me wonder about what the author of Mark’s Gospel was trying to show those of us who are reading the Gospel today and if there is more to this story than meets the eye.

I am suspicious that the blindness was limited to just one person. It seems to me Bartimaeus could see things the people in the crowd could not. Biblical scholars sometimes point out the word translated as *blind* in today’s scripture has additional meaning in the original Greek language the Gospel was written in. It can also mean willfulness or idolatry; when things like emotions or trauma, or stress or ignorance can get in the way of being able to understand or see what is in front of a person.

A beautiful example of this phenomena was featured in an episode of one of my all-time favorite television series, *Doctor Who*. I know I have used this episode of *Doctor Who* in a sermon before, but it is that good. It is also an example of how our beliefs, our hearts, and our openness to recognizing God can sometimes lead to seeing the sacred in something someone else sees as secular entertainment. The episode is called *Vincent and the Doctor*. It was written by Richard Curtis, who is the creative mind behind movies like *Four Weddings and a Funeral* and another television series I know several of you enjoy – *The Vicar of Dibley*.

*Vincent and The Doctor* is about Vincent van Gogh and has The Doctor and his companion, a young woman named Amy visiting Vincent during the last months of his life. It offers us a compassionate view of a man who was not appreciated in his lifetime. This unappreciation of Vincent’s art is mentioned at

the start of the episode, and when The Doctor and Amy first meet him, Vincent says he is the only person who will ever love his art. He believes it's terrible. But he also explains that he sees the world differently than other people, he sees bold colors and light and motion and connection where most people see only darkness.

Vincent's ability to see what others miss helps The Doctor find an alien that is causing violent harm and destruction in Vincent's town, because no one else, not even The Doctor can see it. After accidentally killing the alien, The Doctor and Vincent realize it was blind and it had been afraid, being completely unable to communicate with anyone because it couldn't see them, and they couldn't see it. It was an outsider on many levels. Vincent expresses compassion for the alien, as he also understands what it is like to be an outsider. People are often afraid of those outside accepted society, and their fear prevents them from seeing the goodness in someone or in Vincent's case, the beauty in his art.

The Doctor was so moved by Vincent's wisdom and compassion, he took Vincent into the future, to an art museum, where he could see his art being loved and appreciated. The Doctor even asked the curator about the value of Vincent's art, and the curator generously expressed his opinion that Vincent van Gogh did something very few human beings are able to do: "he used the torment and pain of his life to portray the ecstasy and joy and magnificence of our world." Pain, the curator said is easy to portray, but to use pain to see and express the deep wonder of the world, that is a rare and valuable gift.

There was a lot of blindness in that episode of *Doctor Who*. The people of Vincent's time were blind to the beauty of his art. Perhaps because they were distracted by his mental health struggles, which could be challenging for Vincent, his family, and friends. The Doctor was blind to those challenges too and of course he, Amy and the people in town couldn't see the alien. The alien could not see anything. But the one person in that episode who saw it all was the artist Vincent van Gogh, who through a shared adventure with The Doctor and a visit to a future museum was given a great gift: not the cure of his illness, but a good day. A day where he got to see what people who appreciate his art see. Through the written words of Richard Curtis, who lost a brother to suicide, we get to see that sometimes the most meaningful and valuable thing we can give another person is a good day.

That's what I see Jesus doing for Bartimaeus in today's Gospel. Being blind meant Bartimaeus was an outsider in more ways than one. He was sitting outside the city. He was a beggar, meaning he was outside the economy. He was on the side of the road, outside of the activity passing him by. He is the embodiment of social exclusion.

When Bartimaeus heard Jesus was passing by in a large crowd, Bartimaeus was definitely not blind to the opportunity in front of him. I find it important that he did not see an opportunity to inspire the people in the crowd to be moved to charity and ask for money. Instead, he saw the opportunity to be close to Jesus, to follow him. Perhaps the suffering Bartimaeus experienced all his life as an outsider helped him see what the crowd might not have seen: that Jesus was on his way to suffering and death on the cross, and through his suffering would restore all of us to relationship with God so we could all recognize God in our midst.

Notice the crowd tried to silence Bartimaeus' cries, just like the people of Vincent van Gogh's day did nothing to share or appreciate his art. We aren't told why the people in the crowd did this but can probably imagine all kinds of reasons. It seems to me they couldn't see someone who recognized in Jesus something they didn't.

My favorite part of this story is when Jesus stood still. In Mark's Gospel Jesus is usually on the move, immediately going here and there. That he stopped in his tracks tells me he saw something in Bartimaeus that maybe even Bartimaeus didn't see: his faith.

Instead of going to Bartimaeus himself, Jesus told the crowd to invite him to come to him. It's a clever way of making the crowd change from excluding to including him. Maybe it was Jesus' attempt to make them see an outsider can be invited in, that an outsider was important enough to make Jesus stop and take notice. Because God doesn't only love the beautiful and the able bodied, the popular ones who are part of the crowd. God loves those society labels as outcast and defines by what society judges as a detriment instead of seeing and respecting a human being made in God's image and beloved by God.

When Jesus asked Bartimaeus what he wanted, Bartimaeus asked for his sight, which Jesus said was already his because of his faith. We are led to believe this is the part where Bartimaeus' ability to use his eyes was restored, but I wonder if maybe everyone saw a little clearer after that moment. Because the

word in Greek the author of Mark's Gospel used for *seeing* is a word that can also be translated as a return to a relationship. Perhaps it is possible that more than a physical healing took place on the road that day. Perhaps more people saw what they couldn't before, because Jesus made it a good day for everyone.

Such blindness is not relegated to the pages of the Bible or an episode of Doctor Who. In the Eucharistic Prayer that we will hear in a few minutes, we ask that our eyes be open "to see God's hand at work in the world about us". Whether it is in the work of an artist, a science fiction television show, novel, the perspective of an outsider, or maybe the goodness expressed by a stranger on any given day, there are countless venues for God to work through our joy, pain, boredom, humor, beauty, or challenges in our lives and the lives of those we share the parish, town, school, county, country, and world with. Unfortunately, we can get so busy or distracted or afraid that we can become blind to God's presence and miss God in our midst. Which probably has something to do with why many song writers and commentators to this day define Bartimaeus by a previous disability rather than by his faith.

Sometimes we need to stop in our tracks and stand still and pay attention to an image that strikes us, or a word that jumps out to us in a conversation or when we are reading, or the voice that calls us to take notice of that which we would pass by. Any of those things might be sacred moments that bring us closer to God and to each other.

Likewise, because our parish is located in the heart of Ohio University, and there are people passing us by every day. Today's Gospel is a good reminder of how we can through our presence invite busy passersby to stop with Christ every now and then. Whether it's joining us for a worship service, or for a cup of coffee, or to sit and pray in the meditation area in our yard or in the chapel, to take a face mask, or to take a moment to acknowledge personal or collective grief at our covid memorial, we get to be a sacred place in our neighborhood. We can be a place of rest and healing, where people can be invited in, and perhaps in their time here feel less like whatever might make them feel like an outsider and more like a beloved child of God.

Today's Gospel might also remind us we can't always fix every problem, but what we can do is follow Jesus in sharing the goodness of God's love. The more we share God's love, we might find our eyes open more and more to seeing God present where we didn't before. Thanks be to God. .