

THE PICTURE BECOMES CLEAR
a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, Feb. 25, 2018
based on Mark 8:22-35; Mark 10:46-52

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a sermon series entitled, Journey to Jerusalem, during which we are accompanying Jesus on the road of discipleship. Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

Throughout Jesus' journey in public ministry, he performed a variety of extraordinary miracles. Some were so-called "nature miracles" where Jesus had some major effect on elements in the natural world, such as the time when Jesus brought about a multiplication of loaves and fishes, or the occasion, which will be our focus next week, where he turned water into wine. The most common miracles of Jesus were healings. There are twenty three specific healing miracles that are recounted in detail in the gospels, plus references to numerous other healings that Jesus did. All of these were astounding; but among the most astounding were the *healings of the blind*. If there was anything that healers in the first century could not do, it was to heal the blind.

One day some of the disciples of John the Baptist came to Jesus, and they asked him, "Are you the One who is to come" ("Are you the Messiah?"). [Luke 7:19] The gospel of Luke reports that "Jesus had just then cured many people of diseases, plagues, and evil spirits, and had given sight to many who were blind." [Luke 7:20] And Jesus then said to them, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them." [Luke 7:22]

Jesus was calling to mind a prophecy of Isaiah who, when speaking of the day of God's salvation, had written: "Then shall the eyes of the blind be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy." [Isaiah 35:5-6] The healing miracles of Jesus, and above all the healings of the blind, were a compelling testimony which demonstrated clearly who Jesus is—He is the Savior, the Messiah, the Son of God.

But these healings also reveal something further about the character of Christ. This can be seen especially in the story we heard about a blind beggar named Bartimaeus, who

was sitting alongside a road which led out of Jericho. Jesus set out on that road as he was heading toward Jerusalem. At this point Jesus was moving toward Holy Week and his final days, which would culminate in the cross and finally the resurrection. In other words, Jesus was on the road toward the most important moment in the history of humanity, when he would give his life for our salvation.

As he walked, he was accompanied, as he often was, by a large crowd, which was surging with him down the road. From the edge of the crowd, Bartimaeus began calling out, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.” [Mark 10:47] People nearby told Bartimaeus to be quiet; his yelling was irritating, and the master was clearly on an important mission. But Bartimaeus kept calling, and Jesus heard him. Jesus stopped. He summoned Bartimaeus, who made his way through the crowd to Jesus. And Jesus said to him, “What do you want me to do for you?” [Mark 10:51a] “My teacher,” said Bartimaeus, “let me see again.” [Mark 10:51b] And Jesus healed him.

Jesus was on his way to the most climactic moment in human history; and he stopped—in order to answer the cry of one beggar and to touch him with healing. What does this say about how God will respond to you and me? You may think sometimes that your needs are too small to be of note within the grand scope of the purposes of God. But the story of Bartimaeus says that the Lord hears the cry of the smallest individual and responds in compassion. Can you imagine the Lord today summoning you and saying, “*What do you want me to do for you?*” The story invites us to call upon Christ and to open ourselves to how the Lord would touch our own lives.

Bartimaeus received an amazing physical healing, but he received more as well, which is illustrated in something that happened in the moment right before the healing. When Jesus stopped and told people in the crowd to have Bartimaeus come to him, the story reports, “They said to Bartimaeus, ‘Take heart; get up, Jesus is calling you.’” (Mark 10:49) “So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus.” (Mark 10:50) The beggar's cloak was his basic equipment; he used it to wrap up with, and he spread it on the ground in front of him to gather donations. To throw it off was a radical step; it meant he was throwing off his whole beggar's identity. He was springing forward into a new life, trusting that Jesus would open up for him a new future in the goodness of God. This is a picture of the sort of thoroughgoing

transformation that Christ brings about in human lives. Bartimaeus experienced in the end not only an amazing physical healing but also a profound personal and spiritual renewal.

This is clear in how the story concludes. The final verse reports, “Jesus said to Bartimaeus, “Go, your faith has made you well.” Immediately he regained his sight and followed Jesus on the way.” [Mark 10:52] Sometimes when people receive blessing from God they quickly forget about God and go off on their own way, until they need help again; but Bartimaeus followed Jesus, and indeed it was in following Jesus that he would share in the transforming power of God. All this is a picture of how we are called to respond to God’s grace by following Christ now in discipleship.

So the story is an inspiring illustration of how Christ can work with renewal in us. At the same time, it is also a picture of how we are called by Christ to relate to other people. In the story, there is a notable contrast between the action of Christ and the initial response of the crowd. The crowd told Bartimaeus to shut up and be quiet, [*Many sternly ordered him to be quiet. Mark 9:48a*] and there was probably more going on here than simply a basic irritation with someone who was shouting out loudly. Bartimaeus was a beggar. Jesus was a famous public figure. For Bartimaeus to be calling out loudly for Jesus was like a homeless person yelling for the governor to stop his motorcade. He was really overstepping his bounds. The crowd was basically saying, “Bartimaeus, stay in your place.” But Bartimaeus, we are told, “cried out even more loudly, ‘Son of David, have mercy on me!’” (Mark 9:48b) There are people today who are tired of staying in the lowly place that society has assigned to them. Jesus stopped, and quickly overturned the whole social order. Mark reports, “Jesus stood still and said [to the crowd], “Call him here.” (Mark 10:49) Suddenly the people in the crowd were instructed by Jesus to become servants who were to bring a message of hope to Bartimaeus. The lowly beggar was then lifted up by Jesus to become one of his followers. We see here how Jesus welcomes, lifts up, and includes those who have been marginalized by others; and we see our calling to join with Jesus to reach to all people with the love of Christ.

Many of these themes appear also in the other miracle healing story that we heard from Mark chapter 8, but that story has a couple of additional intriguing features. In the town of Bethsaida, we are told, “some people brought a blind man to Jesus and begged him to touch him.” (Mark 8:22) In Bethsaida, at least, people were kinder than the crowd at Jericho.

Jesus, we are told, “took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village, and put saliva on his eyes, and laid his hands on him.” (Mark 8:23) Why did Jesus do this? At the time, people believed that spittle has healing qualities; after all, if you hurt your finger, what do you do?—put it in your mouth! Healers would also lay hands on people. But Jesus typically healed by simply speaking the word. Why would he use these very archaic and certainly ineffective healing methods?

Two things are going on here. First, Jesus throughout his ministry used terms and methods that people could understand. By touching the blind man’s eyes with spittle, Jesus was helping him to understand and be receptive to the fact that healing was about to take place. This is a wonderful illustration of how Jesus meets us on our terms; He comes to us in ways that we can comprehend. That is why He came to us as a human being in the first place—to come to us on our level.

Secondly, in using ancient healing methods, I believe that Jesus was demonstrating for all time that He would work through the healing methods employed by physicians. Modern medical technology is of course a giant leap beyond ancient techniques in actual effectiveness; but the principle illustrated by Jesus is the same—the healing power of God will often work in tandem with the healing actions of physicians. We hold to this principle today when we go to doctors and also pray, and believe that God will be at work through and along with what the physician is doing.

But the healing of the blind man at Bethsaida is not only interesting because of the healing technique used; it is particularly intriguing because out of all the healing miracles of Jesus, this is the one and only healing in which the recipient of the miracle was not entirely healed at the first attempt. Jesus, we are told, laid hands on the man and asked him, “Can you see anything?” [Mark 8:23] The man looked up and said, “I can see people, but they look like trees walking.” [Mark 8:24] He could see somewhat, but he could not see clearly. Jesus laid hands on him again, and then, we are told, “he looked intently and his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly.” [Mark 8:25]

So did Jesus try to heal this fellow and it just did not work the first time? Is this the one case in the gospels where Jesus says, “Oops, let me try that again?” This would be completely inconsistent with everything else Jesus does. What becomes plain in the gospel is that this

miracle is designed to make a spiritual point.

Whenever Jesus did a physical healing, his purpose was not only to provide relief for a physical problem; after all, his mission was to bring healing not only for the body but even more for the soul, to answer the fundamental problem of our human existence. So with every healing Jesus was bringing a spiritual message. We have seen this already with other healings we have considered in this sermon series—every healing was for Jesus a teaching occasion, designed to say something to everyone about how God works. At Bethsaida the two-stage healing of the blind man was designed to relate to one of the most pivotal events in the gospels.

Immediately following the healing of the blind man, we are told of how Jesus took His disciples to Caesarea Philippi, a town 32 miles away, where Jesus asked them, “Who do you say that I am?” [Mark 8:29a] Peter answered, “You are the Messiah.” [Mark 8:29b] This is the first time in the gospels that one of the disciples said with conviction that Jesus is the Messiah. Peter at this point sees who Jesus is.

Then Jesus began to speak about how He must suffer and be put to death. *Jesus began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering . . . and be killed. Mark 8:31* And Peter, we are told, “took him aside and began to rebuke him.” (Mark 8:32) In short, Peter was trying to set Jesus straight and tell him that suffering is not what the Messiah does. Peter could see that Jesus was the Messiah; but he did not see clearly. He could not yet see what it *meant* for Jesus to be the Messiah, that He was not a warrior King, but He had come as a Messiah who will suffer and die for the sake of the world. It would only be after the resurrection that Peter would finally see completely.

The healing miracle at Bethsaida was thus a profound spiritual illustration. The two-stage healing of the blind man, whereby he came first to a blurred vision, and then finally could see clearly, mirrored precisely what was going on spiritually at that point in the disciples. They had come to a partial and blurred perception of the truth of Christ, and only later would they clearly see what God is doing in Christ, how Christ had come to give his life for us, and how they were called to join Christ not in power and glory but in servanthood to the world.

The problem of spiritual blindness, or blurred spiritual vision, is a major human

problem in every age. This is why the gospels put such an accent on Jesus' healings of the blind, reporting more stories about Jesus healing the blind than his healing of any other malady. It is not simply because there were lots of people with vision problems. The gospels relate these stories because a major problem that Jesus confronted was spiritual blindness, or blurred vision, even in his own disciples. At one point, right before the healing at Bethsaida, Jesus said to his disciples, "Do you have eyes, and fail to see?" [Mark 8:18] Jesus could say those same words today. We have made a lot of improvements in vision care; but our age is as afflicted with spiritual blindness as the first century was. So often, people refuse to see God's Truth, fail to recognize what is right, or struggle to perceive God's calling for human life. Or even when people do see something of the truth of God, it is often a blurred vision. Today there are many in America who would acknowledge that Jesus is the Savior, but who have a very distorted picture of what that means. Jesus becomes the pathway to personal prosperity, or the backer of certain political opinions, or a hammer with which to clobber people who are different from us.

So human beings today are deeply in need of the touch of Christ to be able to see rightly. Like Bartimaeus and the man at Bethsaida, we are invited to come to Christ in faith, and to open ourselves truly to Christ, because it is in Christ that the picture finally becomes clear. In Christ, we see who God is, we see the greatness of the mercy and the saving power of God, and we see our own calling to journey with Him in the way of the cross, in self-giving love for all the world.