

Seeing the Way Clear

Mark 8:22-26; 10:46-52

Mark, the gospel writer, tells his story with great skill and artistry.
He arranges the elements of his gospel
not simply to relate a historic chronology,
but to make a number of key theological points.

And a point that is very much on Mark's mind in chapters 8, 9, and 10,
is the disciples' great difficulty in understanding and accepting Jesus' mission.

Mark places these two stories of Jesus healing blind men
like bookends at the beginning and the end of this section of the gospel,
a section in which Jesus predicts—three times—that he must suffer and die
and then be raised from the dead.

In bracketing this section with these stories,
Mark defines the disciples' problem as one of spiritual blindness,
and Jesus' daunting task as that of bestowing spiritual sightedness.

So much of our lives are spent
trying to see our way clear to achieving certain goals.

It is an interesting figure of speech to say,
“see your way clear”

It means to have the necessary time and resources and willingness
to do something.

Can you see your way clear to join us at the beach this summer?
Can you see your way clear to attend the conference at Montreat?
Can you see your way clear to retire at the end of the year?

We all live our lives with certain goals in mind.

Some of those goals we are aware of and easily acknowledge to ourselves.

Depending on our stage of life, our goals might be

to pass a test in school,
or to make the varsity basketball team or cheerleading squad
or to become the captain of the drum line;
or to get into a particular college, or land a certain job,
or make a down payment on a first house;
or to get a promotion, or to earn an advanced degree,
or a certain level of income;
or to save enough for retirement at a certain age, or achieve a certain net worth,
or travel to a certain foreign destination, or to own a particular vacation home.

These, of course,
are the kinds of goals that affluent Americans set for ourselves.

If you are inclined to argue that you are not all that affluent,
let's remember that "half the world — that is, 3 billion people —
live on less than \$2 a day.
20% of the population in developed nations
consumes 86% of the world's goods.
And half the world's richest 1% live here in America,
...and if you earn more than \$34,000 a year,
you fall into that category."¹

However, if we happened to have been born into a family, say,
living on the garbage dump in Guatemala City,
our goals might be quite different;
like,
simply to live another day
and perhaps some day to live somewhere other than the garbage dump;
to find a job other than gathering from the dump,
or to find enough food for one meal a day,
or to find a piece of metal to make a better roof on our hovel.
Or if we live in certain other parts of South America
our goal might be to escape the oppression of local drug mafia,
and to move our family to a safer environment.

But whether affluent or impoverished, at the center or on the margins,
no matter our particular circumstances,
we human beings spend our lives trying to "see our way clear" to the next goal.

Jesus' disciples are trying to see their way clear to a goal,
a very particular goal.
We might even say they are laser focused on that goal —
the aim to achieve in their lifetime
the glory of the kingdom of God,
and to be as close to the top of that kingdom as possible
when the Messiah is finally and rightfully exalted to the throne.
They want political power.

This is not a false accusation of the disciples. It is not fake news.
All we have to do is listen to what they actually say;
the words of their own mouths provide all the evidence we need.
Chapters 9 and 10 of Mark display their acute blindness
to what Jesus is really about:

Peter wants to build booths for the inner circle to stay up on the mountaintop
with Jesus, Moses, and Elijah.

The whole group of them get into a sort of palace-intrigue-knock-down
about which of them is the greatest.

The disciples work actively to keep perceived outsiders on the outside,
preserving their insider status vis-a-vis the new order.

They have no time for children,
but speak rudely to parents trying to bring their little ones to Jesus—
a mere 24 verses after Jesus has explicitly told them,
whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.

They are confounded that Jesus would turn away a man with great wealth
who is showing an interest in their movement
but who is unwilling to use his resources to help the poor.

And in last week's reading,
James and John try to edge out the other disciples
and establish themselves as Jesus' right and left hand lieutenants.

And the recurring refrain throughout these misunderstandings
is Jesus' consistent teaching, and his repeated assertions,
**that the way of the Messiah is to endure suffering and death,
and only then, on the other side, be exalted to glory.**

This is Jesus' way. It is THE way to which he is calling the disciples.
Jesus sees his way clear into this suffering.
The disciples see little other than their own selfish ambition,
which means they see very little, if anything,
of the way of Jesus.

You may recall that the question Jesus asks Bartimaeus,
is the same question he asked James and John last week:
"What do you want me to do for you?"

Jesus asks it of James and John when they come to him
asking him to do whatever they ask of him.

And Jesus asks it of Bartimaeus
when he comes to him begging for mercy.

The contrast in answers is striking:
One answer is given by insiders,
the other by an outsider.
"The one answer rests on well established [status with Jesus],
the other petition issues from darkness and doubt;
the one request would sidestep suffering,
the other is forged out of loss, exclusion, and helplessness;
the one is bent on an exclusive claim to righteousness,
the other is bowed down in need before the Son who alone is righteous."²

And yet it is Blind Bartimaeus whose response from darkness
earns Jesus' commendation,
Your faith has made you well.

Why should Bartimaeus' desire to see be more commendable
than James' and John's confidence that Jesus would ascend to glory
and that they would be with him,
and that he cared enough about them to keep them by his side?

What is it that Mark wants to show us in this contrast?
Is it that Jesus wants his disciples to seek out suffering rather than avoiding it?
Is it that God's will for human life that we are to suffer as much as possible?
This is hardly good news.

Perhaps the thing James and John are missing in their compulsion to avoid all suffering
is that when we humans strive to avoid all suffering —
when avoiding our own suffering is the goal —
we are often quite willing to ignore or even increase
the suffering of others.

Perhaps the truth Jesus wants his disciples to see
is that the human condition in this life is always one of travail,
and it is only by being willing to enter your own travail and the travail of others—
and maybe even by seeing how the darkness of others is really
the same darkness in which you yourself are living —
that you will see your way clear to new life on the other side.

And so when Barimaeus calls out from the side fo the road with his piteous cry,
Son of David, have mercy on me!,
and Jesus' disciples *sternly order him to be quiet*
(just as, earlier, they had *sternly ordered* the children to keep away)
Jesus will not abide this practice of exclusion, but orders his disciples,
Call him here.

Jesus commands his disciples to take notice of the one who is suffering in darkness.
And only in reaching out to Bartimaeus in his bleak existence on the margins
will the disciples begin to see the way of Jesus clearly.

In the earlier of these two stories of Jesus healing a blind man,
the first bookend to these chapters,
it takes Jesus a couple of attempts to successfully restore the man's sight.

At first, *Jesus asks him, 'Can you see anything?'*
And the man looks up and says,
'I can see people, but they look like trees, walking.'
So Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again;
and he looked intently and his sight was restored,
and he saw everything clearly.

Our experience of gaining the spiritual sight Jesus offers us
is perhaps more often like this first story,
a gradual clearing, a step by step process — even a long, slow process.

This story was surely a foreshadowing of the difficulty Jesus is about to have with his disciples,
as they make their way to Jerusalem and to his cross.

The healing of the disciples' spiritual blindness happens even more slowly.
Which, ironically, could be good news for us.

The impossible may take a little while.

Seeing the way clear to being a disciple of Jesus
will require us to accept what the first disciples — and all disciples since —
are so reticent to accept.

**That we must be willing to attend to the suffering in others,
while facing the darkness of our own lives,
if we are to make it with Jesus to glory.**

We must be willing to remember what Jesus says just after healing the first blind man:

*If any want to become my followers,
let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.*

If we can learn what this means then perhaps — gradually —
we will begin to regain our sight.

This is the calling of the church in the Reformed Tradition in every new time and place,
to strive to see what it means to take up our cross and follow Jesus
on the way.

Then perhaps we can join Mary Magdalene and the other women
at the dark tomb of Jesus,
and we can look up and see what they saw,
as the sun was rising,
that the darkness could not hold Jesus, the sight-giver.

And then the promise will be for us, as it was for the women,
“He is going ahead of you to Galilee. There you will ...see... him.”

Gradually, step by step...failure by failure...learning by learning,
by way of the cross, by way of the tomb,

our faith will make us well,
and we will see the way clear
to the light of God's new day.

Take heart. Get up. He is calling you.

¹ Amy Butler, sermon on The Rich Man and Lazarus at the 2018 Craft of Preaching conference, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota.

² Cynthia Jarvis, *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 4* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009) 212