

Proper 25B – October 25, 2015
Job 42:1-6, 10-17; Psalm 34:1-8, 19-22; Hebrews 7:23-28; Mark 10:46-52
By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

Spiritual Sight: “Earth’s crammed with heaven...”

Jesus asked the blind man, “What do you want me to do for you?” The man responded to him, “My teacher, let me see again.” In today's gospel reading, Jesus heals a blind beggar named Bartimaeus. This took place on the outskirts of Jericho, fifteen miles from Jerusalem where Jesus was headed to celebrate the Passover. He was walking along, teaching and talking with his disciples and others in the crowd of fellow pilgrims. Having heard that Jesus was walking by at that moment, suddenly from the roadside Bartimaeus shouted: “Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me!” It was difficult enough for the others to hear what Jesus was saying without this interruption from the margins, so they tried to hush the panhandler up. But Bartimaeus was not easily silenced. Bartimaeus had that insight characteristic of some blind (and some sighted) people—he, who, in all his life, had never met Jesus and could not even see him, nonetheless recognized in him the Messiah and called him “Son of David.” Once again he cried out, “Son of David, have mercy on me!”

Now, as William Sloane Coffin pointed out, if there is one thing most rabbis and ministers do not appreciate, it is to be interrupted when they are talking.ⁱ But Jesus, whose ears were attuned to hearing the most marginal person in a crowd, knew when speech must end, and listening and action begin. He stopped, and called for Bartimaeus, who jumped up and threw off his cloak. At that moment, blind Bartimaeus stood before him, and Jesus asked, “What do you want me to do for you?”

Let us recall that earlier in this same chapter of Mark, in a section read last Sunday, Jesus had put the very same question to two of his disciples—insiders, James and John—the sons of Zebedee. *Blindly* caught up in themselves they had answered, “Grant us to sit one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” Bartimaeus, on the other hand, the outsider, the blind beggar, answered Jesus' question saying, “My teacher, let me see again.” Bartimaeus' answer to this same question is quite contrary to James' and John's. Bartimaeus asks to see, not to be seen. He asks for vision, not for honor and glory. He does not seek superiority over ordinary people, but simply to become ordinary himself. We all need to think about what we ask of God. We then hear Jesus respond, “Go; your faith has made you well.’ Immediately, he regained his sight and followed him on the way,” thus joining Jesus and his disciples heading toward Jerusalem.

Let's look a little deeper into this story by first looking through the lens, as it were, of a remarkable book written in 1960 by Marius von Senden, entitled *Space and Sight*.ⁱⁱ In that book, Von Senden described the first people in the world who, blind from birth, underwent successful eye surgery. On the one hand, he depicted the wonder with which, for the first time in their life, these patients saw a climbing rose, or a birch tree, or the faces of the people they loved. One girl was so overwhelmed by her first glimpse of the radiance of

the world that she kept her eyes shut for two weeks. When she finally opened her eyes again, she could only say, over and over, “Oh God! How beautiful!”

On the other hand, the world turned out to be bigger and more complex than these patients expected. For example, unable to judge distances, some reached out for things far away and cracked their shins on furniture that they had perceived only as patches of color. Seeing themselves for the first time in the mirror made others of them unhappy and self-conscious, and they wouldn't go outside. The father of one young woman wrote her surgeon that his daughter had taken to shutting her eyes when she walked around the house and seemed happier pretending again to be blind. And a fifteen-year old boy demanded to be taken back to the local home for the blind. “I can't stand it anymore,” he said, “If things don't change, I'll tear my eyes out.”ⁱⁱⁱ

If sight is problematic on a physical level, how much more complicated it becomes on a spiritual level. It's for that reason that notable writers and preachers such as Annie Dillard, William Sloane Coffin, and Barbara Brown Taylor all have strongly connected with these accounts of von Senden's book.^{iv} We happily sing, “I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.” But how many of us do you suppose would share in Bartimaeus' desire to receive his sight, if by “sight” we meant spiritual sight—seeing ourselves through the eyes of Jesus, seeing those around us and our whole world and God with the spiritual vision of Christ? Having quoted this before, it bears repeating—Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote in her poem “Aurora Leigh”:

“Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God
But only he who sees takes off his shoes.
The rest sit round and pluck blackberries.”

It's not that we're evil, we're just a little dull at times. Or maybe it's not that we're dull, only very much caught up in the grip of life and its circumstances. For the most part we don't see “earth crammed with heaven.” Like some of the eye surgery patients, we prefer the familiar dark where we can't be hurt as much. We often prefer to be concerned only with what is within our reach, to stay with what we know.

What does it mean to receive spiritual sight, spiritual insight? Well, if we were to see nature, say, through the eyes of Jesus, we wouldn't see scenery, we would see theophanies, “every common bush afire with God,” as Browning put it—the Creator in Creation, as Moses saw the burning bush.^v

And, as William Sloan Coffin describes^{vi}, if we were to see the nations of the world through the eyes of Jesus, we would see that so many still rule with a lust for power, promoting policies and selfish interests harmful to the legitimate aspirations, not to say inalienable rights, of billions of our brothers and sisters in the human family. We would see the face of God rising with God's justice over the horizon of the billions of the world's poor—like an ocean tide, inevitable and oncoming.

And Coffin adds that if we were to see God as did Jesus, our hearts would melt and our eyes fill with tears at the sight of such unconditional, steadfast love, suffering love, not triumphant love. We would understand that the same love which moves the sun and the other stars is the flame that sets our wills on fire to put God's world aright, and that God's job is not to make only good things happen in our lives, but rather to enable us to respond in a loving, creative way to whatever happens, good or bad. And if we were to see life itself through the eyes of Jesus, our hearts would open up like a morning glory to everything in this world that is good and true and beautiful, *and* we would hear and understand, as did Jesus, the faintest whisper of pain and the cries of many different Bartimaeuses along our path. As Coffin put it, "it's hard to live a [spiritually] sighted life, to feel the pain of the world, to love what others fear, to walk in ways that others shun."^{vii}

If we were to see human nature, our fellow human beings and ourselves, through the eyes of Jesus, we'd see, as Thomas Merton put it, that "there is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun."^{viii}

And finally, if we were to see the church through the eyes of Jesus, this church community, for example, we would see this parish not only as the object of our love and stewardship, but essentially as an instrument of God's purpose and power. Seeing all of the people called Church through the eyes of Jesus—what we call "all the company of heaven" or "the cloud of witnesses" or the "communion of saints"—what we would see besides ourselves would be all the faithful and not so faithful departed who *live in us*, in our hearts. We stand on the shoulders of these many others, living and departed. In fact, those whom we love but see no longer are all around us and involved in who we are and what we do, encouraging us.

So, whatever other reasons we have for coming here today, if we have come also to give each other our love and to give God our love, then together with the Angels and Archangels, with Jesus and his disciples and Bartimaeus and all the saints (whom we'll celebrate next week), and with all those whom we love but see no longer, and all those still present in our lives, we are "the communion of saints." And if we came here today with some sense of expectation and need, we might see or sense Jesus standing before us here, asking each of us as he did the disciples and Bartimaeus, "What do you want me to do for you?" And let us consider Bartimaeus' answer: "My teacher, let me see again" After all, who wants to "pluck blackberries" all their days and not see "every common bush afire with God?"^{ix} As Richard of Chichester prayed 800 years ago: "May I see thee more clearly, love thee more dearly and follow thee more nearly, day by day."

ⁱ William Sloane Coffin, "Let Me Receive My Sight" (New York: Riverside Church, September 21, 1986) in The Collected Sermons of William Sloane Coffin (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), pp. 430.

ⁱⁱ Marius von Senden, Space and Sight (Free Press, 1960)

ⁱⁱⁱ As one observer put it,

"The eye receives and emits light, looks out and looks in, is a window on the soul and on the world, revealing and perceiving, seeing through and true. It can also see too much, or nothing at all. The eye illuminates, understands, expresses, protects, scorches and stares. We can feel truly known

by the way another's eyes take us in, and despair and sorrow at being 'unseen.' Loss [or regaining] of sight can lead to something healing or creative...to the 'third eye' of 'inner sight,'...awareness...Going both ways, this can mean 'there's none so blind as those who will not see,' or can refer to a 'sight' and consciousness that is more responsive to an inner [or deeper] vision than to sense perceptions. In matters of wisdom, 'second sight' has always been considered more accurate, or 'visionary' than the bodily eyes. An 'eyewitness' can be deceived, but the 'blind eyes' of Justice see the truth. So although the eye is traditionally associated with light, insight, intelligence, reason, and spiritual awareness, the inner eyes see with a nighttime vision and darker awareness, [even] into the wisdom of dreams and all the unconscious and emotional elements that also comprise full human understanding...This 'light of the mind' has been imaged as the 'third eye,' the 'eye of Dharma' in Buddhism, the 'eye of Wisdom' in Islam, the 'eye of Shiva' in Hinduism and the 'eye of God' in Christianity.

Seen more obliquely, the eye corresponds metaphorically to initiation, to fleeting visions of beauty, the spirits of things, the emotional center of a storm, the essentials of experience and the secrets of the soul...[and] there is much to be said for peripheral...vision...for keeping one eye in time, the other in the eternal and for exchanging the bright hawk-eyed discernment—or bedazzlement—of consciousness, for the dim and blurry reality of human awareness, expression and vulnerability...for the 'Eye of the Heart.'" (Quoted in "Eye" in *The Archive for Research in Archetypal Symbolism*, Ami Ronnberg and Kathleen Martin, eds., *The Book of Symbols: Reflections on Archetypal Images* (Cologne, Germany: TASCHEN, 2010), pp. 352, 354).

^{iv} Coffin, *Ibid.*, pp. 429-433; Barbara Brown Taylor, *Mixed Blessings* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1986), pp 25-31. Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974)

^v This is powerfully stated in the poem by Lisel Mueller, "Monet Refuses the Operation" (from *Alive Together: New and Selected Poems* (Louisiana State University Press, 1996)):

Doctor, you say there are no halos
 around the streetlights of Paris
 and what I see is an aberration
 caused by old age, an affliction.
 I tell you it has taken me all my life
 to arrive at the vision of gas lamps as angels,
 to soften and blur and finally banish
 the edges you regret I don't see,
 to learn that the line I called the horizon
 does not exist and sky and water,
 so long apart, are the same state of being.
 Fifty-four years before I could see
 Rouen cathedral is built
 of parallel shafts of sun,
 and now you want to restore
 my youthful errors: fixed
 notions of top and bottom,
 the illusion of three-dimensional space,
 wisteria separate
 from the bridge it covers.
 What can I say to convince you
 the Houses of Parliament dissolve
 night after night to become
 the fluid dream of the Thames?
 I will not return to a universe
 of objects that don't know each other,
 as if islands were not the lost children
 of one great continent. The world

is flux, and light becomes what it touches,
becomes water, lilies on water,
above and below water,
becomes lilac and mauve and yellow
and white and cerulean lamps,
small fists passing sunlight
so quickly to one another
that it would take long, streaming hair
inside my brush to catch it.
To paint the speed of light!
Our weighted shapes, these verticals,
burn to mix with air
and change our bones, skin, clothes
to gases. Doctor,
if only you could see
how heaven pulls earth into its arms
and how infinitely the heart expands
to claim this world, blue vapor without end.

^{vi} Coffin, *Ibid.*, pp. 432-433.

^{vii} Coffin, *Ibid.*, p. 433.

^{viii} Jonathan Montaldo, ed. *A Year With Thomas Merton: Daily Meditations from His Journals* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), p. 81.

^{ix} See also Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), pp. 30-31. As Coffin put it,

“if you didn't exactly jump up and run to church this morning, as did Bartimaeus to Jesus, still you came with some sense of need and some sense of expectation [, hopefully]. So picture Jesus standing before you asking, ‘What do you want me to do for you?’ Then consider the possibility of giving the same six word answer as did Bartimaeus, ‘My teacher, let me see again.’ It's hard to live a sighted life, to feel the pain of the world, to love what others fear, to walk in ways that others shun. But then, who wants to pluck blackberries all their days? Who wants to leave another generation to reap the whirlwind and not see every common bush afire with God?” Coffin, *Ibid.*, p. 433.