

“Open Our Eyes, Lord”
Mark 8:22-26

Our first Scripture lesson for today, which was read a moment ago, provides us with a less than flattering snapshot of Jesus’ disciples. Here we have the twelve people who were the closest and most intimate associates of Jesus’ during his earthly ministry. We expect them to have the inside track with Jesus. We expect them to know and understand Jesus better than anyone else. We expect them to be models of faith and devotion. And so, frankly, it is disappointing when we stumble across a passage like this and discover to our surprise and dismay how totally clueless the disciples appear.

Let me read our first lesson again. This time I’d like to read it from The Message, Eugene Peterson’s marvelous paraphrase of the Bible.

Jesus then left them, got back in the boat and headed for the other side.

But the disciples forgot to pack a lunch. Except for a single loaf of bread, there wasn’t a crumb in the boat. Jesus warned, ‘Be very careful. Keep a sharp eye out for the contaminating yeast of the Pharisees and the followers of Herod.’

Meanwhile, the disciples were finding fault with each other because they had forgotten to bring bread. Jesus overheard and said, ‘Why are you fussing because you forgot bread? Don’t you see the point of all this? Don’t you get it at all? Remember the five loaves I broke up for five thousand? How many baskets of leftovers did you pick up?’

They said, ‘Twelve.’ ‘And the seven loaves for the four thousand – how many bags of leftovers did you get?’

‘Seven.’

He said, ‘Do you still not get it?’

Don't you see the point of all this? Don't you get it at all? Do you still not get it?

The sad answer to Jesus' series of rhetorical questions is no...the disciples really didn't see... the disciples really didn't get it. They really didn't seem to see or understand who Jesus was and what he was calling them to, even after being eyewitnesses to many miraculous healings and the feedings of 5 and 4,000 respectively. They were still, in a word, blind.

Immediately following this disappointing snapshot of the disciples' spiritual blindness, we encounter a story of perhaps the strangest healing recorded in Scripture, the story of Jesus' healing of the blind man of Bethsaida. And it is through the lens of this strange healing of the blind man of Bethsaida we begin to have hope that perhaps there is a cure for the disciple's spiritual blindness as well. This story is recorded in Mark 8:22-26, which can once again be found on page 43 of your pew Bible New Testament.

You have to admit that this is a strange healing story. It doesn't follow the pattern of most of Jesus' other healings. We're used to Jesus healing by way of a word, or a touch, or even the application of mud...but spitting in the eyes of the blind man...now that's a little different. And we're used to immediate, all-at-once healings. This two-touch, progressive healing is unprecedented.

There's no question about it, this is an amazing story, but why is this short, five-verse little story interjected here in the Gospel of Mark? Make no mistake; the placement of this account of the healing of the blind man of Bethsaida at this juncture in the Gospel of Mark is not random. Many commentators believe that Mark strategically placed this real event from Jesus' ministry at precisely this point in the Gospel as a word of hope and encouragement for disciples in his own time, and for all who would follow in years to come.

So, what point is Mark trying to make? I think it is this: just as Jesus was able to bring physical sight to the blind man of Bethsaida, so Jesus is able to bring spiritual sight to his disciples. In a sense, the disciples are like the blind man in the first stage of his recovery. After Jesus' first application of

saliva, the blind man could see, but his vision was blurry. He saw people, but they looked like trees that were walking. Likewise, the disciples had some vision of Jesus and the life he called them to, but their vision was blurry at best. For example, later in this 8th chapter of Mark's Gospel, Peter demonstrated remarkable clarity of vision in response to Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" Without missing a beat, Peter replied, "You are the Messiah." He clearly "got it" and understood in that moment that Jesus was the promised Messiah. But, a few short minutes later, Jesus severely chastises Peter, likening him to Satan, when he couldn't comprehend the idea that Jesus would ultimately suffer and die. Peter's vision of Jesus in that moment was blurry and in need of correction.

That's where the second touch of Jesus comes in. Just as the blind man of Bethsaida needed a second touch from Jesus in order to see clearly, so the disciples will need numerous second touches from Jesus in order to see him and have a clearer understanding of his call to follow. Jesus' willingness to provide a second touch which enabled the blind man to see clearly is the ultimate word of hope for the disciples. They can trust that Jesus is willing to provide whatever second touches they may require in order to clearly see Jesus and respond to his call to follow.

And, friends, that's the word of hope for us in this Gospel narrative as well. For as much as we might like to believe that our spiritual eyesight is 20:20, if we're honest, we've got to admit that we frequently don't see any better than Jesus' original disciples. Many days, our ability to see Jesus and understand his call to follow is blurry at best and in need of correction. It's a good thing that Jesus is willing to provide second touches, because we need them!

In our first Scripture text for this morning, Jesus' original disciples were concerned about where their next meal was coming from. Maybe we're not worried about our next meal, but we've got our own concerns and distractions that blur our vision: paying our mortgages, raising kids, work demands, planning for retirement, keeping up with the frantic pace of life...the list could go on and on. But, the point is simple, just like all the disciples who've come before us; we are prone to blurry spiritual vision that is in great need of correction. Like the disciples who've come before us, we're all in need of a

second touch from Jesus in order to clearly see Jesus and how we are to faithfully follow him.

But, I guess we shouldn't be surprised by our blurry spiritual vision. The Apostle Paul spoke of how blurred spiritual vision would be a constant of the life of faith during our earthly pilgrimage. In 1 Corinthians 13:12, Paul said, "Now we see things imperfectly as in a poor mirror, but then we will see everything with perfect clarity. All that I know is partial and incomplete, but then I will know everything completely, just as God knows me now" (NLT). Seeing and understanding everything completely. That, according to Paul, is the hope of heaven, but, for now, we're stuck with blurry vision.

So, what about right now? Is there hope for our blurry spiritual vision in the here and now as we faithfully seek to follow Jesus in this life? I think the answer is yes!

Let me explain what I mean by way of an analogy I think many of us can relate to. Like many of you, as the years have moved on, I have become more dependent on my glasses. They are literally the first thing I reach for when I get up in the morning. Without them, my vision is blurry at best. My eyes are dependent on the correction these lenses provide.

Similarly, all of us who seek to follow Christ in this life are dependent on the corrections or second touches that our Lord provides along the way to sharpen our blurry spiritual vision. So, just what are some of the means of correction or second touch that Jesus provides for us along the way?

The possibilities are endless, but I think there are a few consistent ways that Jesus provides a corrective second touch. The first way that comes to my mind is through reading and reflecting on Scripture. Many years ago, in his Institutes of the Christian Religion, John Calvin, the father of our Presbyterian tradition, referred to Scripture as the "spectacles" through which we come to really see and understand God.

Calvin believed that Scripture is the "prescription lens" that our Lord has given us. Through the lens of Scripture we come to truly understand our Lord, ourselves, and our call to follow.

As we read and reflect upon Scripture, our Lord provides us with corrective second touches that help to clear our blurry spiritual vision. Let me give you an example. Many years ago, I was leading a

Bible study in which we were studying several passages that lifted up the concept of covenant in the Scriptures. We talked about God's faithfulness in establishing and maintaining covenants with His people, despite their faithlessness. We tried to apply the concepts we were talking about and discussed marriage as a covenant relationship and our call to faithfulness as partners in marriage. At the time, I didn't know that one of the members of my class had recently separated from his wife. Several days after the class, he came to me and said that God had spoken to him during our last class session about his need to be a faithful covenant partner in his marriage, and that he was moving back home to try again. Unbeknownst to me, as we opened the Bible and talked about covenant that night, Jesus was applying a second touch to eyes that needed to see the possibility of healing in his marriage.

I believe that another way our Lord provides a corrective second touch is through participation in corporate worship. Several years ago, a woman in my congregation suffered a terrible tragedy. Her sister who was a middle school teacher in her late 20's was involved in a fatal car accident on her way to school one Friday morning. Two days later, on Sunday, the entire family was in the front pew of our sanctuary. Frankly, I was surprised. Their loss was so fresh. I had anticipated they might need some time to regroup before they returned to church. When I commented on my surprise, the woman replied, "We knew that we needed to be here today. We knew that coming here, worshipping God, and being with our faith family, was the only way we were going to see our way through this." As we worship God, we receive corrective second touches that help us see our way through the inevitable hard times in the life of faith. This incident also lifts up the role that interactions with members of our family of faith can play in helping us to overcome our spiritual blurriness.

Another important way that I believe that our Lord provides corrective second touches is through prayer. Some years ago, a friend shared with me that she and her family had been praying for some time about adopting a child. She recounted that one day as she was praying, she felt an incredible sense of peace and clearly understood that they were to proceed with the adoption. Her blurry vision was cleared as she prayed.

As I said before, the possibilities are endless, but the bottom line is the same. Our Lord is in the business of second touches...providing in a variety of ways the ability to see the way of faith more clearly.

Sometimes, what we really need to do is to stop long enough to give our Lord some room to touch us and heal our blurry vision. I know this will sound a little strange, but we could learn a lot in this regard from pigeons. Have you ever wondered why pigeons walk so funny? According to an article I read recently, a pigeon walks the way it does so it can see where it's going. Because it can't adjust its focus as it moves, the pigeon actually has to bring its head to a complete stop between steps in order to refocus. You've seen how they walk...head forward, stop...head back, stop. You know, we have a hard time seeing while we're moving, too! We also need to stop between steps in order to refocus and see clearly before moving on.

In my mind, that's what Lent is all about. A forty day period for us to stop and refocus. An opportunity to acknowledge the truth that our spiritual vision is blurry and we are in great need of the gracious and corrective second touch of our Lord Jesus if we are to see him more clearly and follow him more faithfully.

Are you in need of a second touch today? Know that just as Jesus was willing to extend a gracious second touch to the blind man of Bethsaida, his original 12 disciples, and all the disciples who have come after them, Jesus is ever so willing to provide a second touch to you today...giving you a clearer vision of who he is and his call to you to follow. Will you stop today and receive that touch?

I pray today that our collective prayer will be the ancient prayer of the church that countless disciples have prayed along the way. "Lord, grant that we may see thee more clearly, love thee more dearly, and follow thee more nearly day by day." May it be so that all honor and glory may be given to the One who has been revealed to us as Maker, Redeemer and Friend. Amen.