

LEARNING TO SEE

Scriptures: Mark 10:46-52; Mark 10:32-45

This is a true story reported several years ago in *The New Yorker* magazine about a man named Virgil. Virgil had been blind since he was a tiny child. He was diagnosed with *retinitis pigmentosa*, a hereditary disease that destroys the retina of the eye. He also developed thick cataracts, but since his retina was damaged, the doctors never bothered to remove the cataracts. For the next forty years Virgil was almost totally blind.

Then one day a friend took Virgil to an ophthalmologist to see if anything new could be done for him. To examine his retina, the ophthalmologist had to remove the cataracts, which was now a relatively easy procedure. So the doctor removed the cataracts from one of Virgil's eyes to see into his retina. But when they took off the bandages from the cataract procedure, they were stunned. "Virgil can see!" the friend wrote in her journal. "Entire office in tears, first time Virgil has had sight for forty years." Eyes test proved that Virgil's sight in that eye was 20/80.

But then came a new set of problems. When the bandages were first taken off, Virgil said he saw light, movement, and colors, but he had no idea what it meant. It was all a meaningless blur. Only when the surgeon spoke did Virgil realize that the colored blob he was looking at was the face of the surgeon. He knew this because he recognized the voice and he knew that voices came from faces.

With that Virgil embarked on a long, complicated process of learning to see. The first time he was shown a square and a triangle, he could not distinguish between them until he touched them. He knew the difference in how a square and a triangle *felt*, but he did not know the difference in how they *looked*. When Virgil first watched a baseball game on television he seemed to know exactly what was going on, because he had listened to baseball games on the radio. But when the sound on the television was turned down, he became completely lost. He had no idea what the colored patches on the screen were all about. Furthermore, since he had vision in only one eye, he had no depth perception, and since he had no experience of seeing, he had no sense of distance. He told the interviewer, "When I crossed the road the traffic terrified me, even when I was accompanied. I am very insecure while walking, indeed I am more afraid now than before the operation."

Sometimes Virgil reverted to behaving as if he were blind. When going for a walk, he would close his eyes and use his cane. It took years of experience and practice before Virgil could fully function in the world of sight. (Oliver Sacks, "To See and Not See," *The New Yorker*, May 10, 1993, pp. 59-73.)

Now we come to a blind man in the Bible named Bartimaeus. Apparently Bartimaeus had heard about Jesus because he calls him "Son of David." That expression was loaded with significance. In the Old Testament God promised that a descendant of King David would rule over the people of Israel forever. But when the people of Israel were conquered by the Babylonians in 587 B. C., they lost their king and their independence as a nation. But they

dreamed of the day when God would raise up a new king, a “son of David” who would free them from the Romans and bring peace and prosperity to their land. The dreams for this new kingdom included this remarkable promise in Isaiah 35:5-6: “Then the eyes of the blind shall 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.”

Bartimaeus knew those scripture passages. He knew the promises God made to David and the hope that one of David’s descendants would become king and would give sight to the blind and blessing to the people. So when Bartimaeus calls Jesus “Son of David,” he is claiming that Jesus is the promised king, whom the Jewish people called the Messiah, the Anointed One.

Interestingly, the only other person in the gospel of Mark who recognizes this is Peter. In Mark chapter 8, a story that Robin read in church two weeks ago, Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter replies, “You are the Messiah,” which means the same thing as “You are the Son of David,” the promised king.

Unfortunately, Peter does not yet understand what that means. Neither do the other disciples. At the beginning of our first scripture lesson, Mark 10:32, we are told, “They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid.”

At this point the disciples remind me of Virgil. Their eyes have been opened, but they are frightened by what they see. Jesus keeps talking about going to Jerusalem to suffer and die, and the disciples are getting scared.

So how did the disciples react to this? Like Virgil did. They closed their eyes and pretended that they could not see. They engaged in what psychologists call denial.

You can see this in our first scripture lesson at verse 37. James and John say to Jesus, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left in your glory.” Do you know what is ironic about that request? At the end of the gospel the people who end up on Jesus’ right and left hand are the two thieves who are crucified with him. That is what it means to be at the right and left hand of Jesus. It means to be crucified with him.

I doubt that is what James and John had in mind. In a sense James and John had their eyes opened by Jesus, just like Bartimaeus. They saw clearly that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of David, the promised king. But they closed their eyes to what that meant. They did not recognize that following Jesus would take them on a path of service, suffering, and sacrifice.

Which brings me to back Bartimaeus. The Bible says that Bartimaeus immediately regained his sight and followed Jesus on the way. That last phrase “on the way” is significant. Our first scripture lesson started out saying, “They were on the way, going up to Jerusalem.” Jesus is headed on a path toward suffering and death. When Mark says that Bartimaeus followed him “on the way” it means that Bartimaeus followed Jesus on that path. He spent the rest of his life learning to see the world with the eyes of Jesus.

And that reminds me of Virgil. Both Virgil and Bartimaeus received their sight, but they had to learn how to see. Virgil had to learn what certain shapes and colors meant. He had to learn how to cross an intersection with cars whizzing by. Something similar was true for Bartimaeus. Bartimaeus was given new eyesight when he recognized that Jesus is the Son of David, the promised king. But he did not yet understand what that meant, anymore than the other disciples did. Like the disciples, Bartimaeus had to follow Jesus “on the way,” he had to walk with Jesus on his path of service and sacrifice, before he understood what it meant to see Jesus and to see the world through Jesus’ eyes.

To see Jesus, to really see Jesus, you have to learn to see, just as Virgil did. Jesus is just a shape, a face on a Sunday School picture, until you hear the words he speaks. And when you begin to associate the words he speaks with the life he led and the actions he did, then you begin to understand him. But even if your eyes are opened to who he is, it still takes practice to follow him, because it is scary. It is like Virgil trying to cross the street. Now that Virgil can see all those cars rushing by, he is scared to death. Believe me friends, when you start following Jesus, you are going to see more pain in the world than you ever noticed before. Following Jesus may make you sadder than you were before. Let me warn you about that. When you start looking at the world through Jesus’ eyes, you will see more pain, more sadness, more wrong in the world than you noticed before. You will also see more disappointing things about yourself, more weaknesses in yourself than you knew you had. You will also see more needs in the world, and at first that will overwhelm you, just like all the shapes, colors, and movements in the world overwhelmed Virgil. He had to get used to seeing those things, and you will need to get used to looking at the world through the eyes of Jesus. It takes practice; it takes years of watching him and following him around.

The danger is that if you don’t put in the time and effort getting used to seeing the world through Jesus’ eyes, then like Virgil you will close your eyes and go back to being blind. You will turn away from the world’s suffering and need. You will close your eyes to your own faults and weaknesses. You will go back to stumbling through life not really knowing where you are going or who it is that walks beside you.

It takes years of practice to see the world through the eyes of Jesus, years of following Jesus, years of listening to his word in scripture, years of talking to him in prayer, years of hanging out with his other followers whom we call the church. It takes years of practice to see as Jesus sees, but when you put in the time and effort to do that, you will know where you are going and who it is that walks beside you.

- Ken Onstot