

Betsey Moe  
Sermon 9.7.08  
“The Power of Repetition”  
Mark 8: 22-26

22They came to Bethsaida. Some people brought a blind man to him and begged him to touch him. 23He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village; and when he had put saliva on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, “Can you see anything?” 24And the man looked up and said, “I can see people, but they look like trees, walking.” 25Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he looked intently and his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. 26Then he sent him away to his home, saying, “Do not even go into the village.”

If you heard me preach in late July, you may remember the story I told of the five seminary couples (including my husband and me) going on a prayer retreat. There was a piece of the story that I left off because it was irrelevant to that sermon, but is appropriate for this one. So there were ten of us – all soon-to-be pastors and our spouses – and we had driven to a retreat center late on a Friday night. We were to stay in a house that was owned by the center, but was “offsite.” Another group member and I hopped out when we got to the center to run in and get directions. The woman behind the counter pulled out a Xeroxed hand-drawn map of their grounds, then gave a long narrative explanation to go with it– you know – the type of directions that Mapquest seeks not to be: “You’ll take a right out of here, then a slight left at the big Douglas fir tree with the two oversized limbs, etc. She had lost me after “you’ll take a right out of here,” but I did remember her last words: that the house would be the one with the long driveway and the steps up to the front door. When she asked, “Is this clear?” we both nodded, thinking the other person had been listening. You know the nod I’m talking about – the kind that means, “I may not understand, but I think I can figure this out.”

The house we pulled up to did NOT resemble a retreat house; it was a white split-level home, but it did have steps up to the front door. The door happened to be unlocked, so we all stepped inside. I don’t know if it was the refrigerator pictures of Timmy with his front tooth missing or the dirty laundry piled on the coffee table that first tipped us off. But we all ran out the front door at about the same time, yelling, “Wrong house!”

All because my understanding of the directions had been blurry, but I was not willing to ask for more clarity.

We have come to a puzzling story in Mark today – a story that plays with the concept of owning up to blurry vision. Jesus comes to Bethsaida, a place where Jesus had performed two significant signs. Jesus fed the 5,000 in Bethsaida and walked on water in Bethsaida (both recorded in Mark 6). Bethsaida is *cursed* by Jesus in Matthew 11 (vss. 21-22) among other towns for not heeding Jesus’ message. Bethsaida is a place where Jesus had shown significant power but was not understood. It was a place of metaphorical blindness. And in this city that is blind to Jesus’ identity and mission, Jesus meets a blind man. When Jesus goes to heal him, it seems that Jesus didn’t succeed. “Can you see

anything?" he asks the man, who very honestly (and descriptively!) answers, "I can see people, but they look like trees, walking." In other words, objects are still a little fuzzy. Then, Jesus puts his hands on the man a second time, after which the man can see clearly.

Some people get hung up on Jesus' failure to heal this man the first time and, after reading the story, conclude that maybe Jesus wasn't perfect after all. But to say that this story is about the power of Jesus to heal is missing the point. The story is descriptive of a problem that was plaguing Bethsaida and, as it turns out, the disciples: a fuzziness of understanding that they were not able to admit.

Let's turn to Mark 8. First, Jesus feeds four thousand people. The disciples are in on the event as food distributors, and we have reason to believe that the disciples *see clearly* the fact that Jesus has done something amazing. Then Jesus has a brief exchange with some Pharisees, starting at verse 22: "The Pharisees came and began to argue with him, asking him for a sign from heaven, to test him. And Jesus sighed deeply in spirit and said, "Why does this generation ask for a sign? Truly I tell you, no sign will be given to this generation." The Pharisees suffered from fuzzy vision; if they had been following Jesus, they would have just seen a sign. Now read along with me at verse 14: "Now the disciples had forgotten to bring any bread; and they had only one loaf with them in the boat. And he cautioned them, saying, 'Watch out – beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod,' with yeast meaning 'influence.' But the disciples said to one another, 'It is because we have no bread.' And we thought the Pharisees had fuzzy vision? Jesus says, "Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear?" These disciples were living in a fog, but they were either unaware of it or unwilling to admit it.

Then we have our short passage, verses 22-26, about the healing of the blind man, which we'll come back to. But first, let's look at the fuzziness immediately following the healing passage. Jesus asks the disciples in verse 29, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah," Hmm. Seems to be pretty clear vision here. But then, Jesus tells Peter and the other disciples about his necessary suffering, and Peter rebukes him. "Get behind me, Satan!" Jesus says. Just when he was feeling good about himself, Peter has pointed out to him (in a not-so-subtle way) that he has fuzzy vision, that he does not understand Jesus' mission after all.

There is nothing inherently wrong about having fuzzy vision. Jesus knew that their Jewish understanding of God was being turned upside down and shaken. It is the lack of self-awareness about it that Jesus seems to respond to in frustration. He says, "Do you have eyes and fail to see?" and "Get behind me, Satan" not because the disciples do not yet understand his ministry fully but because they cannot name their own lack of understanding. If they had been able, like the blind man in Bethsaida, to articulate their need for further clarity, they would have been in a position to receive clearer sight. They would have been in the open position of humble learners who reflected the humility of Christ, ready to be ambassadors *for* Christ. Instead, they are overconfident -- a dangerous stance for people going out and spreading the gospel.

I'm not sure we're much different from the disciples. The church is a place where fuzzy vision is not often spoken about; our church culture is unfriendly to expressions of ignorance or weakness. The people who are the most insecure in their knowledge of scripture are the very ones would not dare set foot into a Sunday School class. On the other hand, the people who are confident in their knowledge of scripture are, at times, too vocal, and, at worst, share their knowledge in easy, black-and-white answers that turn others off. In between these extremes are other forms of blindness that we do not want to admit: the blur of our busy lives that leaves us wondering what difference disciplines like prayer and study of scripture would make; our sins that have become so comfortable that we don't recognize them as sin anymore. We have become assimilated to our own fuzziness, keeping facades of knowledge and authority and personal peace and well-being. But if we were to be honest, we would find out that it's not worth it to keep the facades, to give "the nod" when we actually don't have Jesus completely figured out. We would find out that hardly anyone has 20/20 vision when it comes to understanding God and ourselves. We would say in humility, without fear, without shame, "Things are still fuzzy, Jesus. I cannot see everything yet."

What the outcome of the Bethsaida healing story reminds us is that Jesus is clear enough about his identity and mission that he can handle our fuzziness. Jesus does not consider our fuzziness to be a reflection of himself and he does not think less of us when we dare to admit it. In fact, I believe Jesus gives us ample *opportunities* to express our lack of sight. When we swallow our pride, raise our hand in an Adult Sunday School class and say, "I don't even know where the book of Genesis is – and that's why I'm here," we can know that Jesus is standing close by to bring more clarity. When we listen intently to someone with whom we sharply disagree theologically and say from the heart, "You may be right; tell me more," we can be confident that Jesus is standing close by to bring more clarity. When we take a step back from our hectic lives (like Ken talked about last week) and say, "My life is out of whack and I don't know why," we can know that Jesus is standing close by to bring clarity.

Our small group did end up finding the right house, but the other navigator and I were not let off easy. I would like to say that because of that embarrassing experience that I have never since been the nodding idiot, but it's a habit that's hard to break. However, I am learning in matters of faith that fuzziness is not something to hide; in fact, we should expect it and unabashedly give it voice. If everything about God were clear, we wouldn't need *faith*. Thankfully, Jesus practices repetition, healing our vision not just once or twice, but over and over again, and he whispers each time, "Can you see anything?"

With the confidence of God's grace, may we answer, "Not everything, yet."