
Not in sight - Insight!
Martin Grove United Church
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Mark 10:46-52

I imagine we have all heard enough sermons from enough preachers to realize that there are different approaches to reading scripture. Sometimes we read biblical stories as if they are historical fact. Sometimes we read biblical stories as if they are historical fiction. Sometimes we read the stories as allegories, or metaphors, or poetry. In my mind, today's gospel reading doesn't fit any of those standard categories. Why you ask? It's just another story about Jesus healing someone, isn't it? Perhaps. But probably not.

There are two interesting clues that suggest that the gospel story today needs to be read differently. One clue is the way that Bart is named. The other clue is the way that Jesus is named. The unusual ways of naming Bart and Jesus tell us nothing about Bart or Jesus, but tell us instead about audience of the story. OK - I'll switch to English now. The interesting thing about how Bart is named is that the text refers to Bart as, "Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus" But Jesus spoke Aramaic. And in Aramaic, "Bar" means "son". So Bartimaeus literally means the son of Timaeus. But surely that would have been known to the audience for this story. So why does the text say, "Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus"? And the naming of Jesus is even more strange. Bart refers to Jesus as "Son of David", an allusion to king David. But throughout Mark, Jesus has been referred to as "Jesus", or as the "son of man". Why the new label for Jesus, and why at this point in the story?

My Orthodox Bible has this to say on the subject, "The restoration of sight to the blind was a sign expected to be performed by the messiah (e.g. Isaiah 29:18), a power God had reserved for [Godself]. 'Son of David' was a messianic title, showing that Bartimaeus had faith that Jesus was the Christ. The Church Fathers give a spiritual interpretation to this miracle story as well. Jericho was a low-lying city associated with sin; hence it symbolizes fallen humanity. Christ passing through Jericho is an image of his incarnation. The lord restoring sight to Bartimaeus parallels God's restoring

humanity to glory. Having been made whole by Christ, human nature can now follow Christ on the road to the kingdom, symbolized by our lord's subsequent entrance into Jerusalem.”

And so, our gospel story is not actually about Jesus healing a blind man. Or at least that's what all of my biblical references say. The story is not about sight at all. It is about insight. Insight as to who Jesus was. The story is just the author's way of saying that Jesus is the expected messiah. Perhaps that was an important message 2000 years ago in Palestine, but it's a bit hard to know how to get any traction from it today. Today, for Christians at least, I'm pretty sure we take that as a given, even if we do argue about exactly what it means to say that Jesus is “The Christ”.

So today, I feel the need to preach a “word association” sermon. Do you know what I mean by a “word association” sermon? That's a sermon where you can't think of anything that relates to the actual content of a biblical story, so instead you just pick one word from the story and go from there. For example, if the word “donkey” is in the story, then the preacher talks about donkeys for awhile. To my knowledge, I've never preached a word association sermon because I really don't like them. I prefer to dig into the meaning of the story rather than fixating on a single word. But life is full of new challenges, right? So today, let's play “word association” with the word, “sight”.

[slide: 5 senses]

Imagine that you had to lose one of your senses. What sense would you select to live without? According to an extremely detailed and very scientific study - OK - according to an audience survey on the game show "Family Feud", people would choose to lose their senses in this order: smell, taste, touch, hearing, sight. Personally, if I had to select a sense to lose I'd pick a different sense, like my sense of direction, my sense of humour, or my sense of righteous indignation. Or perhaps I could give up my fashion sense, except that you can't give away what you don't possess.

[slide: sight]

But normal people apparently would select sight as the last sense that they would choose to give up. People like sight. People value sight. Even good old Bart, in our gospel story today - when Jesus asks him “what would you like me to do for you?” - Bart

says that he wants his sight back. Being a beggar, Bart could have asked for money, or for retribution on the people who had looked down on him for years. But Bart decided that what he wanted from Jesus was restoration of his sight. Sight seems to dominate our language too. When we are not sure what to think about something, we sometimes say “seeing is believing”. I have never heard anyone say, “smelling is believing”, even though that might be very appropriate if the issue is whether or not dinner is ready. And why is it that sometimes, when we end a phone call, we say “see you later” when we can't even see the other person right then - forget about later.

We are biased to favour sight above our other senses. We favour it in surveys, and we favour it in our common language. Which raises the obvious question: What is so great about sight anyway? Is our sight reliable? Is your own vision reliable?

[slide: checkerboards]

Consider this image. It appears to be a cylinder sitting on a checkerboard. Now, do you notice the 2 squares marked “A” and “B”. The “A” appears to be on a dark checker square, and the “B” is on a light square, right? Well, that might be what you think you see, but that can't be right, because the 2 squares are in fact the exact same colour. You don't believe me, do you? Here, let me show you.

[slide: checkerboards with red circles]

[slide: checkerboards with grey bar]

I created a grey bar and placed it in contact with both the squares, and you can clearly see that the 2 squares and the bar are the same colour, which means that the 2 squares are the same colour. Our vision systems perhaps aren't as perfect as we like to think they are.

If you were fooled, don't blame me - you were being fooled by your own brain. Your brain wants to see the board as a checkerboard, which forces the “A” and “B” squares to be different colours. The cylinder provides a shadow, which allows your brain to make that inference, seeing the “B” square as a light square in the shade. But sorry - those squares are indeed the exact same colour.

[slide: change blindness video]

Consider this short video. The video shows people at a conference, coming to the registration table to pick up some materials. Each guest approaches the table and has a

brief conversation with the registrar. Then, the registrar says she will get a folder for the person and ducks under the table to get it. But when she pops up again with the folder, the registrar is actually a different person. And the guest doesn't even notice the change. Sometimes this even works if a woman ducks down and a man pops up. If you wonder how intelligent humans can be so blind, it's because we almost never see what is actually in front of us - we tend to see what we care about seeing. At the conference, the guests were mainly focused on finding the right room, or finding coffee before their event started, and they were also focused on getting their folder. And many studies have shown that in casual encounters with complete strangers we will never see again, many many details can change - including the whole person - and we are not very likely to notice. This is a phenomena called "change blindness".

[slide: cat in box]

We like to believe that our eyes and brains are like cameras that captures everything. But really, we just capture what we need. Or more to the point - we capture what we think we need. We can easily miss details that seem unimportant to us at the time, but may have been very meaningful for us - if we had only noticed them. On balance - handy though it is, great though it is, useful though it is - sight is perhaps not the ultimate sense. Sight can be deceiving, sometimes, and so we need something better, something more accurate, something more sensitive, something more reliable. Sometimes, we don't need sight. We need insight!

Consider this. Here's another example where simple sight won't give you the whole picture. Consider this church and this neighbourhood. What does sight tell you? Sight tells you that we are an aging church with a shrinking membership. Sight tells you we are too old to be of much use to anybody. Sight tells you that this neighbourhood - particularly if you go north of the Humber River - is a troubled neighbourhood with gangs, violence, mass unemployment, poverty, etc.

[slide: toronto nias]

Sight tells you that you - or me - or we - are in the wrong place, or at least that we are here at the wrong time. Sight tells you we shouldn't spend much time or energy fixing up this building because it really won't matter in a few years. But that "sight" isn't the

whole story.

But what does insight tell us. Insight tells us - actually, I should not speak for you - insight tells me that this is the perfect place to have a church. During Jesus's ministry he spent time with people of limited means, people with problems, people who did not have political, or social, or economic clout. During Jesus's ministry he spent time with people who were emotionally troubled, insecure, fearful, desperate. When we reflect on the life of Jesus and his ministry, and where Jesus spent his time and who he spent his time with, I have no trouble imagining Jesus living here in Rexdale.

[discuss: Our anniversary - what is our vision for this church?]

[This is the right place for a church. Are we the right church for this place?]

We like to believe that our eyes and brains are like cameras that captures everything. But really, we just capture what we need. Or more to the point - what we think we need. We can easily miss details that seem unimportant to us at the time, but may have been very meaningful for us - if we had only noticed them. As we celebrate our 24th anniversary as a congregation, let us all reflect on our hopes and dreams for this community of faith and for Rexdale. What is our vision for our future? Are we prepared to use both our sight and our insight to notice the new opportunities all around us in our beloved church and in our cherished neighbourhood? Believe me, there are new opportunities all around. But perhaps not the ones we traditionally have looked for.

[slide: nerc]

There is real hope in this community. If you don't see it, come to the next NERC meeting on Wednesday and you'll see it. In action. You will meet some wonderful people. You will meet some broken people. You will meet your neighbour. You will meet yourself. You just might meet - if you look properly - Jesus in our midst. But of course you'll meet Jesus - this is Rexdale after all.

Happy Anniversary.

Amen.