

To see or not to see, that is the real question, Hamlet. But in the words of Mr. Miyagi, not everything is as it seems. In recent years, there has been pushback on the miracles of Jesus, and with good reason. Throughout the Gospels, we witness Jesus healing a variety of people with disabilities and diseases, and depending on how we understand them, these stories can stigmatize those with disabilities in our communities, as though they need to be healed to be whole, that it's God's will for everyone to be able bodied. For years, neurotypical people have taught that autism is a disease that needs to be cured, with the implication being that people with autism are deficient as they are. In recent years, many people with autism have spoken for themselves saying, stop trying to fix me and focus your attention instead on making the world more accessible to people with neurodiversity. What if Bartimaeus' problem isn't how his eyes function but how the community treats people with disabilities? That's a question we should be asking ourselves about our community.

I bring this up because the more I read the Bartimaeus story, the more I've come to understand it not as a story of curing but of healing. Healing isn't about fixing physical ailments, but it's about discovering community and wellbeing amidst struggle. There's more than meets the eye in this story (pun-intended), and not everything is as it seems, so let's take a moment to look beneath the surface.

For the last several weeks, we've witnessed Jesus give some of his most difficult teachings to would-be followers. We heard him call Peter Satan. He's talked about camels and needles, and last week we heard James and John misunderstand everything Jesus is about. It's been one story of failure after another with people who should know better. But there's one story at we missed about another blind man in Mark 8 that begins the entire section. People bring a blind man to Jesus, and Jesus spits on his eyes, touches him and asks, "Do you see anything?" The man says, "I see people, but they look like trees walking around." Then Jesus touched his eyes again, and then the man could see clearly. It's the only miracle story in all 4 Gospels where it takes Jesus two tries to get it right, and it's not a coincidence that immediately after that we hear all these stories of his disciples failing to see clearly who Jesus is. They seem to get a little bit of his message, yet in the next moment they are telling the children to go away because Jesus wants nothing to do with you. It's almost comical at times, and I think that's Mark's point. These would be disciples can't see clearly what God is doing in their midst. Seeing in Mark isn't about the functioning of our eyeballs. It's about trusting the God that Jesus called Father, and it's about following Jesus wherever he leads. As we enter the story of Bartimaeus, Mark is inviting us to consider, who are we in this story? Are we those who see Jesus clearly, or those who see people walking around like trees?

Jesus and his followers come to the ancient city of Jericho, the last stop before they head to Jerusalem—the center of power. As they depart, a large crowd forms. Beside the road is this blind beggar named Bartimaeus, Timaeus' son. "Bar" is the Hebrew word for son. So, the name Bartimaeus already means son of Timaeus. But Mark calls him Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus. It's more than a little repetitive. Why the repetition? Maybe his name means something, and Mark's trying to get us to pay attention to it. Timaeus comes from the Hebrew word *tame*, which means unclean. Bartimaeus then means "son of defilement," who is a blind beggar. He is a symbol of the marginalized poor, and he's not on anyone's draft boards for model disciples. In fact, he may well be the least likely disciple, yet he shouts, "Jesus, Son of David, show me mercy!" No one else in Mark calls Jesus, "Son of David," except Bartimaeus,

and it's a dangerous thing to say. To be called "Son of David" is a messianic title, naming Jesus as Israel's true king instead of that imposter Herod up the road in Jerusalem.

That kind of messianic hope is in the air all around Jesus, but it's not something you say out loud. To do so can get you and Jesus and his followers killed, which is probably why the crowd tells him to be quiet. After all, it's not like when Jesus gets to Jerusalem, Herod is going to say, you know what, why don't you take my throne? I don't deserve it. As the prophet Beyonce says, "Power is not given to you. You have to take it." But Bartimaeus don't care. He shouts even louder, "Son of David, show me mercy!"

Unlike James and John, Bartimaeus isn't asking for power. He's asking for mercy. He's asking for help from someone who has the power to help. Already, it's clear that Bartimaeus sees Jesus with more clarity than the disciples. Bartimaeus believes that mercy is what Jesus is all about, and he's right. Jesus is all about mercy because God is all about mercy. This is the kingdom Jesus has come to bring, not violent political revolution, but establishing a beloved community where mercy reigns, where those who have been cast aside are centered and given voice. Hearing Bartimaeus' cry, Jesus stops. He listens. He doesn't ignore the cry.

Many years ago, I read a quote I've never forgotten: "The cry of the poor is not always just, but if you don't listen to it, you will never know what justice is." That's exactly right, and Jesus is one who always listened to the cry of the poor. He takes the time to consider Bartimaeus' cry and calls him over. Bartimaeus throws his coat to the side and jumps up to get to Jesus. For a beggar, a coat is your most valuable possession, and unlike the rich young man, Bartimaeus leaves everything behind to come to Jesus. Jesus asks him the same question he asked James and John last week, "What do you want me to do for you?" This is our question as well. What do we want from Jesus? Eternal life? Power? Success? A cure? What do you really want? It's not as easy of a question as it sounds. People spend years in therapy, trying to answer this question, what do I really want?

Bartimaeus says, "Teacher, I want to see." And Jesus heals him with the power of his word, and Bartimaeus immediately began to follow Jesus. To see or not to see, that is the question. Seeing in Mark's Gospel is not about having eyes that function properly. It's about trusting that God is always in the mercy business. The truth is mercy offends us. We are immersed in a world that says only certain people deserve mercy, while others can be cast aside. But mercy destroys all our merit systems. God shows mercy to everyone and pays particular attention to those who've been silenced and marginalized. The reason Bartimaeus can see is because he bets on the God of mercy, and then follows Jesus on the way. That's what it means to see. That's what it means to be healed, and that healing is available to us all.

Maybe this is what it means to be a Christian. What if it's not about affirming a set of creeds and dogmas, but about daring to trust that mercy is at the very heart of God, and then walking in the way of mercy. Bryan Stevenson, the great civil rights lawyer writes, "Each of us is more than the worse thing we've ever done...there is a strength, a power even, in understanding brokenness, because embracing our brokenness creates a need and desire for mercy, and perhaps a corresponding need to show mercy. When you experience mercy, you learn things that are hard to learn otherwise. You see things you can't otherwise see; you hear things you can't otherwise hear. You begin to recognize the humanity that resides in each of us." Bryan is right. Mercy is what connects us to each other and to God because no matter who

we are, where we come from or what we believe, we all need mercy, and God is in the mercy business.

Mr. Miyagi said, not everything is as it seems. As I said before, the Hebrew meaning of Timaeus is unclean or defiled. Bartimaeus, this son of defilement, in his blindness sees clearly what most of us cannot. But there's a Greek meaning of the word Timaeus as well. It's a verb that means value, honor, or venerate. The good news is that God values, honors, and venerates what we label unclean, and thank God for that. For despite all our attempts to clean ourselves up and make ourselves respectable, we all share a level of brokenness, and we all need mercy. More than revolution, eternal life, a cure, or power, what we want more than anything else is mercy, and God loves to show mercy.