



Disabled

October 24, 2021: Holy Eucharist Rite II for the Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost and 125th Anniversary Memorial Organ

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Oh LORD: May Your Word only be spoken; and Your Word only be heard: in the name of Jesus Christ, the Living Word. Amen.

I wonder what it would be like to hear, or read with a braille Bible, the Gospel story today. Bartimaeus the blind beggar got me thinking about this. I'm used to reading whatever I want, whenever I want, and I get a lot of information about the world from reading.

As a sighted person, I'm pretty sure I read, or hear, this story in a way that is different than a person who is not able to see.

Of course, the kind of sight that the Gospel refers to also is a metaphor for understanding. As a literary device, the author of Mark uses two stories about blind people receiving their sight to frame the three episodes where the disciples either completely misunderstand, or willfully ignore, Jesus' teaching about his death and resurrection, and about the death and resurrection path Jesus calls his disciples to follow.

So, I get that blindness means spiritual misunderstanding and not simply, or necessarily, literal blindness. I get that seeing means understanding. And I get the irony that it is the blind people in these stories who "get" who Jesus is, while the sighted disciples continue to misunderstand.

One of the characteristics of Jesus that is highlighted in Mark, is his powerful healing. He heals blindness, bleeding, demon possession. But I wonder what it might feel like to be a modern blind person, who hasn't been given sight—either by faith in Jesus, or by modern medicine (though I have no trouble understanding that God works through modern medicine)—to hear this story.

I am really curious about this. I have learned that in Jesus' time, being blind wasn't simply about not being able to see. It was often about being unemployed, desperately poor, and marginalized from mainstream society. In addition, in the thinking of the time, blindness, or any illness, was also often seen as a curse, as a punishment for some sort of sin. It could lead to religious exclusion: there is some evidence that blind people were seen as ritually unclean, and so may have been prevented from Temple worship. So, Jesus, in healing this man, was saving him from a life of poverty and rejection.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-48054113>

I learned about the importance of this context from an English writer and teacher of prayer who happens to be blind, named Lyndall Bywater. When asked if Jesus were to be walking the streets today and saw a blind person with a guide dog and a briefcase on the way to work, would he think that person needed healing? She says, "I don't know if he would be healing in the same way. I don't think Jesus would look at that person and think 'there is someone who needs pity'." <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-48054113>

To encounter Scripture as a disabled person is to notice details that might go unnoticed by typically able-bodied folks. For example, if we spent our life in a wheelchair, we might notice that in the book of



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Daniel (7.9-13), there is an image of God on a throne with wheels; and in the book of Ezekiel (1.1-3.27), there seems to be a very complex image of God on a chariot. To go even further, have we ever noticed that resurrected Jesus retains the scars from his brutal execution? In fact, the disfigurement is how his disciples recognize him as the Jesus they knew, loved and followed. (Luke 24.39-40; John 20.20-27)

People who live without the full ranges of senses and abilities of typical human beings, I've learned, can relish the special, honed senses that they do possess. The stories of heroic disabled people's lives are often flattened into saccharine narratives about overcoming adversity, intended to make nondisabled people feel uplifted and grateful. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/21/opinion/helen-keller.html>

But their lives are usually more complicated, like the rest of our lives. Take Helen Keller, for example, perhaps the most famous disabled person in American history, who was blind and deaf. Her life in the popular imagination has often been reduced to the famous scene in the 1962 film "The Miracle Worker," where, by the water pump she learns to communicate by the efforts of her long-suffering teacher and companion, Annie Sullivan. But as a new documentary I've read about on PBS indicates, Keller had richly complex life which included not only expansive inter-national work on human rights, civil liberties, and diplomacy, it also included performing in a vaudeville act with Annie Sullivan for a few years in the 1920s, which horrified her friends.

She was eager to dispel her image as a saintly, one-dimensional figure, and so are, I've begun to learn, those in the richly diverse blind, deaf, and deaf-blind communities.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/21/opinion/helen-keller.html>

So, by the power of the Holy Spirit, Bartimaeus' engagement with Jesus stirred in me questions. What does it mean to be created in God's image? What does it mean that there are medical treatments that can fix things and alleviate suffering? And that prayer sometimes leads to physical healing? And that sometimes people's physical and psychological conditions cannot be changed, only managed or endured? Again, the Lyndall Bywater writes, "The sighted world may find it difficult to believe but being alive and at peace with yourself while being blind is a bigger miracle than having your sight restored."

<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-48054113>.

In reflecting on this story, I've found my heart enlarged, that Jesus encourages me not to project my own interpretations on to what appear to be disabilities. That being created in God's image is way more complex and beautiful than I can imagine. That along with Bartimaeus, I can gain, and regain, my understanding of God's gracious and expansive love for us all.

Amen.