

## Blindness

I don't know about you, but at this point, I'm wondering what more there is to be said about this business of the last will be first and the first last. This is the third time in a row we've heard Jesus say this.

Jesus keeps repeating himself to get his disciples to see what he's talking about. Does he think they're blind?

Well...apparently, yes.

The section of Mark we've been dealing with over the last several weeks begins and ends with a story about healing a blind person. Those stories help us interpret what's in between.

The first story about healing a blind person wasn't actually included in our readings, although I'm kind of wishing now it had been.

It's an odd story – the only one like it really.

In that story, Jesus and his disciples come into the village of Bethsaida. Some people bring a blind man to Jesus and ask him for healing. Jesus takes the man out of the village, spits in the dirt and puts the resultant mud on the man's eyes.

Then Jesus asks the man if he can see. The man said, I can sort of see. I see people but they look like trees walking around.

So Jesus touched the man's eyes again and only then is his vision is completely restored. It's the only two stage healing in all of the Bible.

Then at the end of this section, we read this story about the healing of blind Bartimaeus. Bartimaeus gets healed in one shot.

In between the two stories about healing the blind is this whole journey with Jesus and his disciples. They're walking toward Jerusalem and Jesus keeps trying to tell them what's going to happen. He'll be arrested, tortured and killed and on the third day rise.

And he'll tell them that to follow him, they will be asked to take up a cross, too. Power the Jesus way is in fact laying aside our own self-interest for the sake of others...especially the vulnerable and suffering.

And every time, the disciples promptly say something that shows they are still blind to what Jesus wants them to see.

So, today, Jesus tells them, for the third time, what's going to happen to him.

But it's like James and John don't even hear him.

They are blinded by a way of thinking about power that they can't let go of. They ask Jesus for positions of status in a world in which everything is flipped upside down.

The last will first and the first last...

Whoever wants to be the greatest must become a slave to all...

They can't see it. All they can see is themselves sitting in the reflected glow of Jesus' glory. But here's the thing...if they truly follow Jesus, it's not reflected glory they'll share with Jesus, at least not for now. Instead, it will be the same suffering and sacrifice...the same cup of sorrow and baptism of death...that Jesus experienced

The disciples, and frankly we, too...live in a world in which we believe there are winners and losers. And we believe that being a winner is preferred to being a loser.

And...if we can't be a winner, we can back the winners. In the Roman system of patronage, if you backed someone in power, you got a little bit of that power, too. That's what James and John are aiming for.

In the world's system, we are always looking for the edge that gets us closer to the top.

A world of winners and losers has always kind of made sense to us. It seems fair to us. We want our abilities to be rewarded. We want to win at the game of life.

The alternative to that seems like...well, losing.

But it's that whole paradigm...that whole worldview of winners and losers...that Jesus upends. Instead of winners, Jesus calls us to be holy losers.

Jesus calls us to be a people whose goal is not glory for ourselves, but rather a community in which everyone gets what they need to live. A community in which there aren't winners and losers but only people loved by God and each other.

What would a world like that be like?

If all who led or ruled in some way adopted this idea of being servant to all the people they lead, we would be in a different place than we are now.

If all who have wealth were willing to give up a substantial amount to truly end poverty, we would be in a different place.

If all of us were committed to serving others, and not just the people who can pay us back or somehow give us more status, we'd be in a different place.

If all of us, including those who society considers losers were treated as persons of value, we'd be in a different place.

But the ways of the world often blind us.

We are blinded by our own desire for glory.

We're blinded by our own shame and guilt and feelings of unworthiness, and blind to the fact that we are God's beloved and that God has important things for us to do.

We're blinded by a world where might makes right.

We're blinded by a world that tries to get us to see ourselves only in terms of what we can accomplish or what we own.

We're blinded by a furious need to be right and a belief that those who don't agree are either wrong...or worse lying.

We're blinded by a world that creates winners and losers. And we fight to be a winner, desperately afraid we might be a loser.

So let's just be really blunt about Jesus vision in this section of Mark...

Jesus says that the way to life is the way of the cross...the way to life is by dying to our own self-interest for the sake of the world.

Jesus picked up a little child and said whoever welcomes the most vulnerable and insignificant among us in fact is welcoming Jesus himself.

Jesus told a rich man that the only way to tap into the power of eternal life was not by keeping the commandments, but instead by being willing to shed his attachment to wealth and giving it up for the sake of the poorest, so that a new way of life could be born for all.

Today, Jesus tells us that in the way of life he calls us to, we are to be servants of all.

You'd think it wouldn't be hard for us to see. But it is.

We're sort of like the first blind man in this section of Mark – the one who at first could only sort of see.

We sort of see how this should all work...we get glimpses of the unfolding kingdom of God...we get glimpses of a world where all serve one another in love and where the least and lowest are lifted up...we get honest glimpses of ourselves and how much God loves us, no matter what the world tells us about ourselves.

We get glimpses of our connection to God and to one another...and to creation itself.

But for now, we are still sometimes blinded by the way things are in our world.

This section of Mark's gospel begins with a partial healing of blindness. But it ends with the promise of complete healing.

This section ends with a blind man who simply wants to see again.

The healing of blind Bartimaeus gives hope that maybe one day the disciples too will see clearly what Jesus is trying to teach them.

And, as we too struggle along this way of becoming disciples, blind Bartimaeus gives us the hope that we too can more clearly see what Jesus wants us to...and to step out in faith behind him.