

Seeing Each Other

Mark 10:46-52; 2 Corinthians 1:3-11

I read a story recently that stood out for me. It is a story that involves church life. And though I don't know the people in the story personally, there were elements of many of them that I've experienced throughout not just my time as a leader in ministry, but throughout my life as someone who is on a journey of faith. The story¹ goes like this:

Shane was the minister of a mid-sized church. One of the long-time church members was a man in his sixties named Dave. And Dave was one of those people who was overly involved in any church business. He would corner new members and provide reasons for why they should increase their givings. He would step up with confidence, stating that he could fix the broken entryway door, but only make it worse and even lock everyone out on Sunday morning. The problem wasn't that Dave *thought* he was always right or that he was always needed. The problem was that Dave *told* everyone so, explaining to parents of small children why they were parenting wrong, or announcing all the reasons why the car you bought is ridiculous, or asserting why worship needed to happen a particular way. In short, Dave was exhausting.

On the other end of the spectrum was Jodi. Jodi was a woman in her early thirties who was bubbly and upbeat. She had come to the church right out of university by happenstance—the church was in her neighbourhood, and feeling lonely one Sunday, and being a real people person, she showed up. Since then Jodi had been a fixture; her energy was infectious, giving new life to the aging congregation. In generosity, she made sure things happened, making arrangements for special events, hosting a jazz cocktail party to raise money for the confirmation retreat. In short, Jodi was well-loved for her kind, upbeat and selfless leadership.

So, it was no surprise that both Dave and Jodi were elders on the church council. In two radically different ways, they were both leaders. Though many found Dave difficult to work with, the truth was that the church needed people willing to do things, and Dave was more than willing.

As the church council met for its annual retreat, there was intense business to be done and Shane, as the minister moderating this event, knew it. So he decided to start with an exercise that was simple but would help everyone recognize that church issues are not more important than people. He set chairs facing each other, a couple feet apart, asked everyone to take a seat, and then passed out notebooks and pencils. Shane asked them to face their partner and say nothing. One half of the pair was to look at the other person, just to see, for a whole minute, and then for two more minutes to sketch the person's face.

¹ Story drawn from *The Relational Pastor* by Andrew Root

The discomfort was palpable. To cope, giggling and funny faces started the process, and a handful of people protested that they had no artistic skills. But Shane reassured them that it wasn't about artistic ability, but about seeing. After a few minutes they switched roles and the sketched became the sketcher. Then they switched seats and repeated the process three or four more times.

At the end of the exercise, things felt less uneasy and more relaxed. They debriefed the exercise together and people expressed that, after pushing through the unease, the activity forced them to really see each other. As people took turns sharing what their experience was like, Dave spoke up. He stated that he felt really, truly comfortable drawing everyone. People nodded, affirming that this was their experience as well, but Dave wasn't finished. He then added, "I mean, I felt really comfortable with everyone, everyone... except Jodi. I felt judged looking at her."

People sat shocked. Had Dave really just said that out loud? Why couldn't he just stay silent this one time? No one knew what to say; after all, the absurdity of Jodi making *anyone*, let alone Dave, feel uncomfortable seemed crazy. As Dave continued to spew his reactions, the rest of the council looked, as inconspicuously as possible, over to Jodi. Her face was bright red. Her eyes were open wide. She sat frozen as if any movement might bring on a flood of tears.

Shane, now regretting the decision to do this exercise at all, knew something needed to be said. He resisted his instinct to say "Hey Dave, why are you being such a jerk?" and instead turned to Dave and asked, "Okay, we definitely hear that she made you uncomfortable, but that is only a reaction to a feeling. Why do you think you are reacting with discomfort?"

Without missing a beat Dave responded, "I don't know, she just does." Shane tried again, "I know Dave, you've told us your reaction, and reactions are important, but tell us more about what you're feeling."

Dave folded his arms and looked at the floor. Everyone watched, not sure if Dave was being reflective or shutting down or getting ready to explode. Finally, Dave broke the silence. He stated, "Well..." and then stopped. His voice cracked and the muscles in his face twitched. After a few more moments of silence he tried again, "Well, you all know my daughter Donna. She grew up in this church, and I told many of you she just moved back home with us. She doesn't get to church much and I've said it's because she works late on Saturdays. She does work on Saturdays, but only until four. And she is done with that job anyway; she was fired for not going. I'm sure a few of you know this, but Donna suffers from severe depression and she can't come to church because she can't get out of bed, and she can't get out of bed to work. She lost her job, her apartment and even her car because of the depression."

Now everyone's attention was squarely on Dave. The council sat hanging on his every word. As his eyes filled with tears, Dave said, "And guess that's it. Yeah, no that's it, that's why Jodi makes me feel so uncomfortable."

“What is?” Shane asked quickly.

“Well, I guess I just feel so defensive and uncomfortable looking at Jodi because when I see her, I see who Donna could be if she didn’t suffer from depression. I see my little girl in Jodi. It just reminds me of what my sweet Donna could have been.”

Something transformational had just occurred. Dave was seen, and seen in the fragility of his humanity. From that moment on, Dave was no longer the know-it-all hindrance, but a person—a person with struggles, who experiences brokenness. He became someone the church members shared not just leadership, but his life with.

We heard a similar story today from the gospel of Mark. Blind Bartimaeus is also an outsider. He presumably has no household and is left to sit at the side of the road begging for help; begging to be seen; begging to be treated as a fellow human being, deserving of love, of compassion, of justice. But no one really sees Bartimaeus. In fact, when Bartimaeus calls to Jesus the crowd shuts down his voice. There they are, a crowd of Jesus followers, so focused on their own journey, on the lessons they can learn from Jesus, on the miracles they might get to witness, on future glory, that they miss the entire point of what Jesus’ mission is. Instead, they inadvertently toss that mission of love and welcome to the side and rebuke Bartimaeus, telling him to be quiet.

But Bartimaeus is undeterred. He calls to Jesus saying, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” In previous stories in the book of Mark, we hear about the rich young man who wanted eternal life, about James and John who wanted glory, but Bartimaeus, blind and parked on the side of the road, wants only mercy. In fact, never having met Jesus before, he seems to know more about him than those in the crowd; perhaps if some of the crowd had taken the time to listen instead of shushing they would have learned something from this outsider. Bartimaeus’s faith is not about reciting the correct confession or subscribing to certain dogmas. It is his unrelenting conviction that Jesus can and will rescue him from his need; that Jesus will not only set him on a course toward wholeness, but will see him, see every broken part of him, every struggle and difficulty, and continue to welcome and invite him every day.

Jesus doesn’t call to Bartimaeus directly, he tells the crowd to “call him here.” Suddenly the crowd who were trying to keep Bartimaeus quiet have a change in tone, “Take heart” they say, “Get up, he is calling you.” Why this change in tone? Were they, up until that point, trying to preserve Jesus’ honour? Were they trying to control access to Jesus? Are they embarrassed about Bartimaeus’s low status as a blind beggar? The thing is, in seeking what they wanted for themselves, the crowd and the disciples miss an opportunity to invite and welcome and bring consolation to someone who was suffering. In keeping near to Jesus they, ironically, distanced themselves physically and spiritually from others on the outside. But Jesus doesn’t scold the crowd for doing this. Rather, he asks them to call Bartimaeus over—he asks them to do the work of discipleship that they had been called to do all along: welcome, invite, journey alongside; to truly see others and show compassion; to extend love. To break the boundaries between insiders and outsiders; to be transformed.

We are all called to see one another as more than just individuals, or as insiders and outsiders. We are called to see one another as nuanced persons with all our own struggles, joys, and brokenness. Through this encounter with others, we find ourselves in Christ, and Christ in us—there is transformation as we build on our ability to have empathy and compassion, and not just making but cultivating relationships.

In our scriptures today we also heard from Paul. Paul is another example of someone who was blind, though in this case it was his encounter with Jesus that made him this way. But in that blindness, Paul, who at this point is still known as Saul, also sees—he sees the personhood of Jesus Christ. Saul discovers the grace in this encounter; it gives Saul the *person* of Jesus to be in relationship with, someone who will share in his life, if he will only see and stop what he had been doing.

And while the story could have been that Saul had another encounter with Jesus which made him see again, instead we learn that someone, a disciple named Ananias, heeded Christ's call to go see Saul. Ananias had heard about this persecutor and his cruelty toward all those who invoke the name of Jesus. He was not keen to confront this man, but also could not bring himself to turn away from someone that Christ called him to reach out toward. So Ananias went, and he laid his hands upon Saul. And Saul's blindness fell away like scales and he was, instead, filled with the Holy Spirit.

Jesus calls the persons of his church, like Ananias, to join Saul's person, to share his suffering of body and mind, not to silence him or cruelly judge him. Filled with the Spirit, and *seen* by a disciple for more than who he once was, Saul-turned-Paul is transformed.

Paul knows suffering, but he also knows how shared suffering can help us on the journey; to have others by your side who truly see you is to not be alone on the journey. As he says in his letter to the Corinthians (and I'm using a paraphrase here), "Your hard times are also our hard times. When we see that you're just as willing to endure the hard times as to enjoy the good times, we know you're going to make it, no doubt about it." More than this, Paul sees our shared suffering as the way to life in Christ. Paul recognizes that he is taken into union with Jesus and sharing in his death, he also shares in his life.

When Dave was seen only as an individual who was easier to get along by walking the other way, he wasn't seen for his whole self; his struggles and brokenness were left unknown. But when Dave confessed why Jodi made him uncomfortable, when he revealed Donna's depression and his own broken heart, the group reacted with empathy. They felt Dave's pain and opened their own person to his because through his expressed suffering they saw not an individual or an outsider, but a person.

When the crowd and the disciples ignored the pleas of Bartimaeus, he too was not seen as a person; he was an obstacle or an embarrassment not worthy of Jesus' attention as much as their own. But Jesus does not scold the crowd for shushing Bartimaeus; rather,

he extends an opportunity for them to see Bartimaeus as a person, to empathize with his struggles, to be inspired by his faith, and to invite him on the journey.

Whether we are Dave and know the pain that comes with holding in our suffering and hiding elements of who we are, or are like the crowd, silencing those who are searching for a way to be seen and known, or are like Bartimaeus, crying out and ready to move in faith, there are opportunities to open ourselves, to share our person, to be transformed. Following in Jesus' way, we don't need to scold those who have no idea what they want Jesus to do for them, nor should we call their faithfulness to question. Rather, as we call the community within this church—and even beyond these walls and computer screens—to see one another and attend to the other's cry for mercy, whether the other is as far away as Afghanistan or as close as the person in your pew—we lovingly gather a crowd around what God is doing in the world to love, nurture and honour all human life. When we see others beyond the surface, when we view each other as nuanced persons with struggles and brokenness, our hearts transform and we are better able to react with love and empathy instead of the instinct to “hush them up.” Empathy possesses the power to bring forth transformation. There is a sacredness, a holiness that occurs when our personhood is unveiled to one another; where personhood is revealed and we are each truly *seen*, there, also, is the personhood of God encountered. Amen.