

A Sermon by the Very Rev. Dr. Renée Tembeckjian
Trinity Episcopal Church
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Proper 25B: Jeremiah 31:7-9; Psalm 34:1-8; Hebrews 7:23-28; Mark 10:46-52

“Corrective Lenses”

You have probably all seen the famous Snellen chart – that’s the vision test on the wall of a doctor’s office – the column of black letters with the big E at the top. When my brother was young, after taking that test, he was immediately referred to a respected ophthalmologist. Turns out his sight quite impaired – 20/200 vision in both eyes. The doctor frowned and was quite blunt with my mother: *Your son is as blind as a bat.*

This was truly quite perplexing, because my brother had no complaint. He could see just fine. However, when corrective lenses were placed in front of his eyes, the impact was startling. How very different everything suddenly looked – sharper, clearer, brighter. He thought, *Wow... this must be what it's like to actually see!*

This is not an uncommon occurrence. Our vision can change so gradually and so subtly that we don’t even realize it. Often times, it is not until we look through a different lens – when suddenly we *do* see clearly -- that we look back and realize we haven’t *been* seeing clearly for some time.

But how do we know the actual state of our vision, how can we tell if we might be seeing through a warped lens. And, if so, what are the corrective lenses we need?

In today’s Gospel, it is a man named Bartimaeus whose vision is the issue. Being blind, he is forced to sit outside the city gate, relegated to an area beyond the wall, shut out with other human beings also deemed unclean or expendable – the poor and afflicted, women, the foreign born, children – forced to beg just to stay alive, not welcome to enter the city and live among those privileged to live on the other side.

Bartimaeus is blind, yes, but he hears the clamor of the crowd and he knows there is a healer in their midst. And he calls out to this healer – this Jesus person – although folks in the crowd, including some of Jesus’ own followers, want him to shut up.

But Bartimaeus will not be silenced. He dares to call out again. And when Jesus hears his cry, he bids him to come forward. And Jesus asks him one question:

What do you want me to do for you?

We have heard this question from Jesus before...and we have heard some answers. Remember that James and John, two of Jesus’ closest disciples, ask Jesus to seat them at his right and left hand. They want luxury seats in the Jesus dome.

Their eyes may work fine, but they are blind, nonetheless.

They do not recognize that their request is not from devotion to Jesus, but from their own striving for status and privilege. Not realizing their blindness, the disciples ask for *power*. But Bartimaeus knows *his* condition. *He* asks for vision.

Who would *you* say is more afflicted?



How do we know if *our* vision has become gradually dimmed or faded over time? Would we know if *we* need corrective lenses? When Jesus asks us that question – *What do you want me to do for you?* – would we dare ask for new and deeper vision, or are we more likely to insist that our sight is just fine, thank you, and that it's everyone *else* who needs to get on board with *our* point of view?

Just how *do* we ask for healing from a blindness we don't even know we have?

Rather than pity Bartimaeus, might we actually envy his awareness of his own limitation, *and* admire his courage to ask for new sight?

Why, courage? Well, new vision is a gift, yes. It widens our realms of understanding, curiosity, and possibility. But new vision *also* requires letting go of long-time patterns of thought, belief, or behavior -- psychological, emotional, political, spiritual – that may have gradually warped our viewpoint.

It can be humbling, sometimes dramatically so, to see a new reality and acknowledge that we were not as insightful or knowledgeable or wise as we once thought.

So, yes, it takes courage... and it also requires integrity – to be faithful to the new reality we are now better able to see – not perfectly, of course – none of us will attain 20/20 spiritual vision in this life – but more clearly than we saw it before.

And that beautiful, clear new reality is what Jesus *always* offers – not a kingdom on a *map*, where those blind to human need seek power for *themselves* – but a kingdom of the *spirit*, where those with *true* vision seek the empowerment of *others*.

That is the corrective lens of the Gospel. That is the vision of the Christian Way of Love.

And when we are true to that Way, in everyday words and acts – public and private, personal, political, and communal, when we uphold the common good over personal status, privilege, and power – then the world may realize that *its* vision has gradually become dimmed, even at times to the point of blindness.

As those who claim to follow Jesus, we are called to become the *human* lenses through which the *world* might see that Gospel kingdom more clearly...

...because it will be seen so very clearly in *us*.

Amen.