

What do you want Jesus to do for you? (Mark 10:35-52)

Something I appreciate about scripture is how it doesn't gloss over the imperfections of its heroes. This testifies to its transparency—it's got nothing to hide. At the same time, this offers hope for all of us. Flawed people are whom God uses to bring about God's purposes in the world. When you think about it, flawed people are the only ones available to do that work. Some flaws are more apparent than others. That is to say that they're out there as tangible acts or behaviors that can't be denied. Abraham lied to save his skin in Egypt. David was an adulterer who murdered. Peter denied Jesus under pressure. Paul persecuted Christians and participated in killing Stephen. And the Bible faithfully records their flaws, but thankfully it also records their redemption and how God was able to use these and others despite their flaws. The Bible's transparency in this actually provides hope, for who among us is flawless? All of us have the opportunity to join that company of flawed individuals through whom God worked powerfully. But part of that process involves recognizing flaws and allowing God to heal them so that we're prepared to act as the Spirit leads.

Our text today is a study in this. The first section of our text draws our attention to a couple of Jesus' disciples—James and John, a pair of brothers described by Jesus earlier in Mark as “sons of thunder.” Remembering that they were commercial fishermen when Jesus called them to follow him, they were likely what we would call rowdy or boisterous. At the very least they evidently had strong personalities with strong opinions. On one occasion recorded in Luke 9, they were ready to call down fire from heaven to consume a Samaritan village that had refused Jesus entrance. They were certainly zealous. It seems they were also ambitious. This moment in our text takes place just before Jesus enters Jerusalem on the week that ends with the cross.

They'd been with Jesus now for three years, and hearing him speak of what lay ahead in Jerusalem, perhaps they thought this would be their last chance to approach him with their request. So, boldly they come—“Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask.” In reply Jesus asks them, “What do you want me to do for you?” Hang on to that question. We heard their request as Jamie read the passage for us. It was about position, power, privilege in the coming kingdom. IOW, elevate us, thinking perhaps that they had proved their worth and merited this favor. They were jockeying for position in what was to come—it was a pre-emptive strike against the other disciples—we want you to guarantee our claim to honor.

As we heard, the other disciples were indignant about this—the sons of thunder were at it again—maybe they were indignant because they hadn't thought of it first. But Jesus recognized the flaw in their thinking even though they didn't. They were projecting their view of the kingdom through the lens of the world's view—that once the kingdom arrived, they would be in control. That's power according to the world—the ability to control. Having been powerless, they were ready to assume the reins of power, to call the shots, to get what they wanted regardless of who bears the cost. Jesus saw that they were still consumed with self-interest—that flaw obscured their vision of his kingdom.

Jesus exposed the flaw by pointing out that his kingdom wasn't at all like that. The great—or honored—in his kingdom were those who serve others. IOW, holding the values of his kingdom—which are the same values God has always promoted: mercy,

justice, truth—the great serve in bringing about these values for the benefit of others. The kingdom isn't just about getting up to glory, it's about bringing glory down to the world right now. What are present needs in the world around you? How do you meet these needs in others through mercy, justice, and truth? Christ's kingdom is built through service rather than control.

How do we get to that place?

This is where we pick up the next section of our text that describes what happens with Bartimaeus. We don't know much about him, except that he was blind and his life consisted of relying on handouts from passers-by as he sat begging on the roadside. On that day he's aware of a commotion nearby; he heard that it involved Jesus of Nazareth. Evidently he knew of Jesus by reputation, and by that knew of Jesus' ability to heal, so Bartimaeus created a commotion of his own trying to capture Jesus' attention. The public tried to silence him—they were content to leave him in his situation. But Jesus heard him and called him over. Once there, Jesus asked him, "What do you want me to do for you?" The same question asked of James and John. One would think the answer obvious, but Jesus didn't assume—he gives Bartimaeus opportunity. In a heartbeat Bartimaeus says, "Rabbi, I want to see." Not riches, not a better house, not position or acclaim—essentially Bartimaeus was asking for wholeness—I want to see. For him a sighted life would change his life. And sight is what he receives, and in receiving sight, he followed Jesus along the road.

In the New Testament, miracles are at face level marvelous demonstrations of Jesus' compassion and power, but they also function at a deeper level to reveal spiritual meaning. Blindness is often equated with a lack of understanding seen particularly in John 9 in the aftermath of another case of blindness healed. In that case the religious leaders of the day had questioned Jesus' goodness because he had healed the blind man on a Sabbath, to their way of thinking a violation of the prohibition to work on the Sabbath. Concluding the matter with the healed man, Jesus said, "For judgement I have come into this world (and it helps to remember that judgment simply means truth-telling), for judgement I have come, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind." The religious leaders ask him, "What? Are we blind too?" In essence Jesus answered, "actually, yes you are."

In our account, at a spiritual level, we're all of us Bartimaeus—we lack understanding—that's the flaw. And as we're face to face with Jesus, he asks us what he asked him, "What do you want me to do for you?" And Jesus waits for our answer. This is a crossroad moment: as we consider our answer, will it be the request of James and John—personal gain, or that of Bartimaeus—understanding: I want to see.

You see, friends, misperceptions persist among us as Christ followers, largely because we remain at the center of our faith journey. More than we care to admit, our interest in the life of faith tends to revolve around what God can do for us personally. We may not be ambitious in the same way James and John were, but self-interest still compels much of our attention. Our vision of the kingdom consumes our energy. This misperception spawns a type of spiritual myopia that feeds the illusion of well-being; from our perspective the kingdom is clicking away famously, but we fail to see where it is not. When we do get a glimpse of reality that doesn't correspond with Christ's kingdom, we can deal with the tension by projecting its resolution to future glory where all will be made right. But again, the kingdom is not just a distant future, it's a present

reality intended as a lived experience here and now. Earlier we asked, how do we get to the place we're experiencing the kingdom now? We get there by understanding, by gaining sight, by seeing the reality of the world as it is and the reality of the Kingdom as present, and understanding that we are intended to be the intersection of those kingdoms. Wherever you are as a Christ follower, is where the kingdom of Christ and the kingdom of the world intersects. And you are the person, flawed as anyone whom God has used, but to whom the resources of heaven are available so that they can be brought to bear on the issues that subvert the purposes of God. Friends, in the world around us there is no shortage of issues that subvert the purposes of God. But know as well that there is no limit to the resources of heaven at our disposal.

We happen to be focusing on one of them at present. Racial injustice is just one of many issues that subvert the purpose of God in the world—it has flared in recent weeks, and because it has caught the attention of the world, we want to see—we want to understand the subtle mechanics of racism, which is against the revelation of God, so that we might be prepared to act in ways that destroy that work. In many ways the church of Jesus Christ has been blind to this—I confess my own blindness in this—when it doesn't directly affect you on a regular basis, you don't sense any urgency in addressing it. But this lack of urgency on our part as Christ followers is precisely the inertia that allows it to continue.

Friends, we're followers of Jesus, whose life on earth was described in Acts 10:38 as “going around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil.” Whose power is driving racism in our world? Who is suffering under that power? What does healing mean in this context? Since we are followers of Jesus and model our lives on his, what does it mean for us to go around doing good in terms of the issue of racism? I John 3:8 tells us, “The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work.” Can we agree that racial disharmony is the devil's work?

So this work we're doing at the moment is for the sake of understanding, and as we gain understanding we'll be in a better place to hear Jesus directing our response. Our conversation with Jesus invites him to release us from our flawed vision of the kingdom however that manifests in our life as we also ask him for sight, and in seeing follow him where he goes. What will you answer as Jesus asks: What do you want me to do for you? AMEN