



Blind Spots

TEXT
Mark 10:46–52

October 9, 2016 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

I don't think that there are some weeks when it is more important to trust the gospel than other weeks, but if there are, this week may be one of those weeks. It's been a difficult week.

Hurricane Matthew is leaving destruction in the East. Hundreds are dead in Haiti. Entire communities are destroyed there.

And then there is the election. When you think it is not possible to further erode trust and remove basis of pride, the candidates have proven otherwise. We want our campaigns to inspire us, to point to the best in us, but instead they have embarrassed us.

It's been a hard week. The only thing I know to do in response is to be as faithful to the gospel as I know how.

Bartimaeus is a blind beggar who cries out for Jesus to open his eyes. Jesus does so, and Bartimaeus follows Jesus on the way. This story reads like a straightforward miracle story. Jesus restores sight to a blind man. But like most miracle stories, this one is more than it appears at first sight (pardon the pun).

The blind man's name is Bartimaeus. Of all the miracles in the gospel of Mark, this is the only one where we know the name

of the person who receives the miracle. Given that, you have to wonder: Is the name important? It is. It's an unusual name. The language Jesus spoke was Aramaic, and in Aramaic the word *bar* means "son." So *Bartimaeus* means "son of Timaeus." And in Greek, Mark's native language, Mark spells it out: Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus. Both in Aramaic and in Greek, this blind man is a son of Timaeus. OK, so what?

If you were in worship a few weeks ago, that name may sound familiar to you. There was a work of Plato that describes what it means to be truly human. The human, Plato asserts, is the one who observes the unerring ways of God displayed in creation and thereby deduces how life is to be lived. According to Plato, those who attain the good life are those intelligent enough to rightly see the way of things. To be human is to be smart, to be a philosopher.

Conversely, those who are not able to see the world rightly are blind. They may wish to be human, but theirs is a wish that is in vain.¹

Of course, the result is that for Plato to be human is to somehow be better than, smarter than others. For Plato, the true humans rise up above the unfortunate lesser masses. The name

of the work where Plato explains all of this is called *Timaeus*.

To *Timaeus*, the gospel says that those who are not as smart as you are not inhuman; it is you that fails to see their humanity. You think you see, but you fail to recognize your own blindness.

So this son of *Timaeus* — this son of philosophy — says, *I have been defined by my mind, but I have ignored my heart. Lord, open my eyes. I thought I could see, but I was blind. Let me see again.*

If I understand the text, Mark finds in the ministry of Jesus a correction to the teaching of Greek philosophy and calls those who thought they could see ... *blind*. This is a scary thought. I say that because I am convinced that blindness is not limited to a few Greek philosophers. It is a problem for everyone.

Here's the challenge of this story. It reads as a story of Jesus healing one who is physically blind, but telling us that this is the story of a son of *Timaeus* makes it clear the real point is not physical blindness, but spiritual blindness. There's a difference. The thing about those who are physically blind ... they know it. They know they are not able to see. They build their lives, often in inspiring fashion, but

they are always aware that they cannot see.

The thing about spiritual blindness is that we almost never know it. When we are spiritually blind, we think we see things clearly, and we are oblivious to that which we fail to see.

When our kids were young, I spent more than a few Saturday mornings watching 5- and 6-year-olds kick the soccer ball around the field. It is sort of “herd soccer.” Every player on the field is within ten feet of the ball at all times. They just “amoeba” around.

For the parents, this seemingly simple game can be agonizing. We worry about the score. And parents worry about skill development. We worry about the score. We worry about the rules, and about that big kid on the other team. *I think that big kid is in second grade!* And did I mention, we worry about the score?

My friend Cheryl told me about a game that was particularly lopsided: 21 to 2, I think. On the way home, she said, “Joey, Son, I’m so proud of you. You played hard, and you ran fast. It doesn’t always work out. I’m sorry your team lost.” The little guy had to be devastated. “I’m sorry your team lost, Son” — to which Joey said, “We lost?”

Sometimes it’s hard to see, but every Saturday morning there are two games going on out there. There is the game the kids are playing. The parents, we think we see it, but we are blind to what is actually happening.

The thing about spiritual blindness is that you think you

see things clearly. It seems to me that all around us are moments of spiritual blindness. We need Jesus to open our eyes. It has been that way for a long time.

Each year in officer training, we discuss a writing by an American theologian, James Henley Thornwell. Thornwell was the most significant theologian of the Presbyterian Church in the 1800s — a brilliant scholar and a faithful churchman.

In the winter of 1861, Thornwell joined others from the Church across the South to form what would become the Southern Presbyterian Church. The country was split North and South, and the Church was as well. The Southern Church taught me the faith. It was formed in Augusta, Georgia, in December 1861. Church leaders gathered to address the presenting issue of the day. They explained how owning slaves created no conflict with following Jesus Christ.

Thornwell said, “There are many rights which are owed to other people: the English, the French and the slave master, for example, but not the slave because God had not fashioned the slave to meet the responsibilities that accompany these rights.” It’s the way God planned it.

Thornwell further argued that slavery was a matter for the state, and the Church had no right to comment on it.²

This was the most significant moral issue in our nation’s history, and Presbyterians said, God has no interest in this. Because this is a matter of the state, it is “beyond our sphere” as the Church.³

Like Bartimaeus, they were blind. The most devastating blindness is that which occurs when we think we see things clearly, and we have no idea what we have failed to see.

Her name was Mrs. Dorthea Johnston. She was an African American woman, I imagine in her late 60s. I met her within the first year of my ordination — 1986. We served on a Presbytery Committee together. She said, “Rev. Are, my name is Mrs. Dorthea Johnston.”

I said, “Dorthea, please call me Tom.”

She said, “Please call me Mrs. Johnston.”

I thought, “My, my! We can be more friendly than that.” I thought she was a bit standoffish. But Mrs. Johnston it is.

I later learned I was blind to something. You see, she and I had not shared the same history, so we saw some very basic things differently. What I did not and still cannot fully understand is what it means to be a full-grown woman and to be called “girl”; or for her husband, as an adult, to be publically called “boy.” When that is your history, what does it mean for a young 26-year-old white man to presume to call her Dorthea? I thought I was being friendly. But I learned I was touching a place that had decades of memory and hurt — and to that hurt, I was blind.

I am Bartimaeus. We all are. Seldom do we have the capacity to fully appreciate the hurt of others, particularly when those others are not like us.

I think that is why racism is so difficult. I don’t know many

people who actively hate people of other races, but I think all of us struggle to understand those whose lives are different from ours — because we assume we have lived the same story. But we have lived different stories.

The African American Museum has opened on the National Mall. It tells of slavery and Chuck Berry; of Martin Luther King and Satchel Paige; of Grandma Moses and Condoleezza Rice. It tells of courage and hurt, of injustice and beauty. But the struggles with race continue.

One place I see this is the conversations swirling around Colin Kaepernick and his kneeling during the singing of the National Anthem. If the trend continues, there will be others who join him today.

Many others have joined him, including Marcus Peters of the Kansas City Chiefs. They say they are offended and concerned by the apparent casual attitude that *some* police officers display toward African American life. *The Washington Post* reports that 738 black men have been shot by police this year. We have seen on our TVs too many times where the shootings are far too casual about black lives.

We have also seen Micah Johnson Dallas open fire on the lives in blue. Police officers risk their lives; there is no question about that.

Kaepernick pledged to give one million dollars to community policing efforts. I don't know if he has done so yet, but he has said he would.⁴ Nevertheless, it has been offensive. Kaepernick has received death threats.

The “N word” and threats of “lynching” have surfaced. Some police unions have threatened to stop providing security for NFL games. We are divided.

How did we get here? I think there is some blindness at issue. I worry about the temptation to assume that my journey, my experience, my view on reality is universal. When I think that, I am blind.

So what do we do? Do you know someone whose life is different from yours? Talk with them. Listen to them. Follow the wisdom of the prayer of St. Augustine: Seek to understand before you seek to be understood. That may be the best way for Jesus to open our eyes.

Carol and I were moving from Charleston to go to another community, and I attended my last Presbytery Youth Ministry Committee meeting. It was there that I said farewell to Mrs. Johnston. I told her, “I have appreciated serving on this committee with you, and I have learned much from you.”

She said, “Thank you, Reverend Are, and please call me Dorthea.”

Now I don't know. Maybe she changed her mind because — after much of her life being surrounded by those who presumed to determine what she would be called and how she would be addressed — it was enough to carve out a little space to determine that for herself. Maybe that was enough.

But what I hope — and I am not sure about this, but I hope that she felt that a young white man recognized that he had been

blind and was trying to see; he wanted to see; and so she chose to invite him to call her Dorthea. I hope that was true.

It has been a hard week, and we have seen the pain that is inflicted when the blind assume they see. Maybe we can do better.

It's been a hard week. It will probably be a hard week again. Seeing the truth of it all is not easy. So let us join with Bartimaeus — our brother — and pray that Jesus might open our eyes.

¹Gordon Lathrope, *Holy Ground* (2003), p. 29

²*The Presbyterian Enterprise* (1956), pp. 216–217

³*Ibid.*, p. 216

⁴Sean Gregory, “The Perilous Fight,” *Time Magazine*, October 3, 2016, pp. 38–41

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The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.