



I Am Blind, but Think I See

TEXT
Mark 10:46–52

February 4, 2018 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

It's the first Sunday in February, which means we are celebrating an anniversary here at Village. It was this Sunday last February when we held our first worship service at Antioch. Since then we have welcomed new members. We have completed an Angel Tree. We have baptized babies, and we'll soon hold our first wedding. We have begun a Music Ministry and held a wonderful Vacation Bible School; and on Christmas Eve, there were 180 people gathered to worship at Antioch.

I am grateful to Rev. Hallie Hottle, who has worked with the saints at Antioch to bring us to this place. I think the best days are ahead of us, as today we are welcoming the Rev. Dr. Brandon Frick to begin his ministry as Site Pastor at Antioch. It is important for us to pay attention to the good things that God is doing in our midst, and today is a good day for Village Church. That's the truth.

We have been talking about truth and how we know it. Two weeks ago, we reflected on Jesus' affirmation that he is the truth — not that he *has* the truth, but that he *is* truth.

Last Sunday, I suggested that truth is often larger than

fact. Sometimes you can stack all your facts end to end, and they still can't tell the whole truth. We are living in days where people feel a freedom to make up their own facts. As the Rand Corporation says, we are living in a time of truth decay. It's one thing to believe in truth that is larger than fact. It's another thing to claim truth that is contrary to fact. Communities can't hold together when facts are ignored.

Today I want to reflect on why finding the truth is difficult.

So, I want us to sit with Bartimaeus. Bartimaeus cries out to Jesus. Jesus' followers, in an embarrassing response, try to shut him up. But Jesus says, "Bring him to me."

"What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asks.

"I want to see again."

Jesus says, "Go; your faith has made you well," and immediately he regained his sight. Jesus opened his eyes. But I think Mark tells us this story because he knows that all of us, at some time or another, we all need our eyes opened.

One of the books I enjoyed over the past several years is *Destiny of the Republic*. It's the story of the assassination

of President James Garfield. Garfield's story is a remarkable one. He showed up at the Republican convention of 1880. He wasn't a candidate. But after days of deadlocked voting, Garfield emerged as the nominee. He hadn't campaigned, and he told them he didn't want the nomination. He was nominated anyway — and then he won the election.

But just months into his presidency, on July 2, 1881, a man named Charles Guiteau approached him in a train station, produced a pistol and shot him. Garfield collapsed, but the gunshot did not kill him. His doctor killed him. Dr. Willard Bliss oversaw the president's medical care.

Sixteen years earlier, Joseph Lister demonstrated that sterilizing medical instruments with carbolic acid would kill germs, reduce infection and save lives. Despite Lister's dramatic success, Dr. Bliss dismissed this practice as too time-consuming and unnecessary. He couldn't see the germs, so he assumed they weren't there. Each day, with unsanitized fingers, Dr. Bliss probed the wound in search of the bullet. He was never able to find the bullet, but every day

he introduced more and more bacteria into the president's body. On September 19, President Garfield died of raging infection.¹

There were many who pleaded with Bliss to practice sterile treatment of the wound, but he was blind to this truth. He was blind, but he thought he could see. That is the most surprising kind of blindness: the blindness we experience when we think we see.

Seeking the truth is not an experience. It is a responsibility and a discipline.

I can be blind to most anything. Just last week, I was standing at the fridge and said, "Carol, I thought you said we have Brussels sprouts."

"They are in the fridge," she says.

"Well, I'm looking in the fridge. [You know where this is going, don't you?] I'm looking in the fridge, and I can tell you there aren't any Brussels sprouts here."

She walks over and, as if with a magician's powers, she pulls Brussels sprouts from the fridge, places them in my hands and, before she walks away, says, "Here you go, Bartimaeus." Sometimes I wish she didn't know the biblical stories as well as she does.

Have you ever failed to see something that was right in front of you? Bartimaeus pleaded with Jesus: *I want to see again. I thought I could see, but I don't know my way. I don't know truth. I want to see again.*

Several years ago, Carol came home from work. She

was late. She had worked long past quitting time, which she often did. I told her they were taking advantage of her. If she worked all those extra hours, she should get paid. I told her, if I were her, I would just walk out at 5:00 and let them deal with it. I was being so supportive.

She finally said, "You know, for 25 years, you have worked as many nights as not. For 25 years, you have worked every weekend. For 25 years, you have put in overtime. Can you remember even one time that I gave you a hard time about it? I happen to like my work, and it makes a difference — so just let me make my choices."

Wow, I didn't see that coming. Just call me Bartimaeus.

There is physical blindness, and there is spiritual blindness. I want to say something obvious: Folks who are physically blind, they know they can't see. It can be nothing short of inspiring to watch them navigate through a sightless world, nothing short of inspiring, but they know they can't see.

But spiritual blindness, relational blindness is different. When we are spiritually blind, we see something. So we assume we see the truth. We assume there are no germs because we can't see them, and the germs are killing us. Because we see something, we have no idea that we are blind. We have blind spots.

Jonathan Haidt wrote the book *The Righteous Mind*.² He has studied how we make

moral decisions — how we decide what is good for us, good for our families, good for our nation.

We are children of the Enlightenment, so we assume that we are rational in making those decisions. When faced with moral questions, we appeal to reason, we think it through, and then we decide what is good.

This is why it can leave us slack-jawed when we bump into Uncle George at Thanksgiving, and the election comes up, or the Middle East comes up, or the tax plan comes up, and Uncle George is talking crazy. Forgetting how this went last time, you explain your perspective. You lay out your case. It's very reasonable. And the most amazing thing happens: Uncle George remains unconvinced. He is dismissive of you. He ignores important facts and obvious values. And you think, "How can this man actually be in my family?"

Why is that so common? How does Uncle George show up in every family and in every church — and some of you are no doubt thinking, in every pulpit?

Haidt says that this happens in part because we are not making moral decisions the way we think we are. His research indicates that we actually make moral judgments not rationally, but intuitively. We make them with our emotions. We know in our gut what is right or wrong. He says, we make our moral decisions in our gut, and then we appeal to reason to make our case as to why our decision is right. The

metaphor he uses is the rider on an elephant. When it comes to moral decision making, our gut is the elephant, and our brains are the rider. The rider has a little influence, but not much. And one reason Uncle George seems crazy? He is riding a different elephant.

If Haidt is right — and he makes sense to me — it's that we are not as rational as we have told ourselves we are. Our decision making is more nuanced. That's not bad, but it does mean we have blind spots.

When it comes to the truth about God, about love, about the good, about beauty, about righteousness, we all have blind spots. Because we see something, we assume that which we see is actually the truth. But we may be missing what is right in front of us.

Seeking truth is not an experience; it is a responsibility and a discipline. It requires humility and a willingness to pay attention to others.

Let me give you an example in my own faith journey. Over the past generation, the church engaged in a battle over the inclusion of LGBT folks. I have told you before that I changed my mind about that. If you are my age, and you are for inclusion, you have changed your mind.

For a generation, the church went to battle with all of our best arguments, our best reasons. And when our theological skirmishes were over, even our best theological arguments had not changed anyone's mind. The way the church changed

her mind was through friendship. We engaged relationship and embraced the full humanity of people we had assumed were lesser.

But in this long journey, I changed my mind on more than an issue. I had a conversion regarding the whole role of Christian faith.

I grew up believing that the whole point of Christian faith was to get my thoughts right — to believe the right things about issues and to have the right doctrine. But I realized that Christian faith is not most at home in my head; it lives in my heart, in my relationships.

Of course, thoughts are connected to relationships. But I spent 20 years of ministry watching us let the issues determine who our friends are, when I think that friendship should determine how we deal with issues. I had that backwards. I was blind, but thought I could see.

Seeking the truth is not an experience; it is a responsibility and a discipline. I still have blind spots; we all do. But it's possible to have our eyes opened every now and then. I think paying attention to each other is the key. We are better when, instead of letting the issues determine who our friends are, we let our practice of friendship determine how we deal with the issues.

¹Candice Millard, *The Destiny of the Republic* (2011)

²Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind* (2012)

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

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