
“Insight”, not “in sight”
Wesley Mimico United Church
October 25, 2015
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Mark 10:46-52

I imagine we have all heard enough sermons from enough preachers to realize that there are different approaches to reading scripture. Sometimes we read biblical stories as if they were historical fact. Sometimes we read biblical stories as if they were historical fiction. Sometimes we read the stories as allegories. Or metaphors. In my mind, today's gospel reading doesn't fit any of those standard categories. Why you ask? It's just another story about Jesus healing someone, isn't it? Perhaps. But probably not.

There are two interesting clues that suggest that the gospel story today needs to be understood differently. One clue is the way that Bart is named. The other clue is the way that Jesus is named. The unusual ways of naming Bart and Jesus tell us nothing about Bart or Jesus, but tell us instead about the intended audience for the story.

OK - I'll switch to English now. The interesting thing about how Bart is named is that the text says, “Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus” But in Aramaic, “Bar” means “son”. So Bartimaeus literally means the son of Timaeus. But surely that would have been known to the intended audience. So why does the text say, “Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus?” And the naming of Jesus is even more strange. Bart refers to Jesus as “Son of David”, an allusion to king David. But throughout Mark, Jesus has been referred to as Jesus, or as the “son of man”. Why the new label, for Jesus, and why at this point in the story?

My Orthodox Bible has this to say on the subject, “The restoration of sight to the blind was a sign expected to be performed by the messiah (e.g. Isaiah 29:18), a power God had reserved for himself. 'Son of David' was a messianic title, showing that Bartimaeus had faith that Jesus was the Christ. The Church Fathers give a spiritual interpretation to this miracle as well. Jericho was a low-lying city associated with sin; here it symbolizes fallen humanity. Christ passing through Jericho is an image of his incarnation. The lord restoring sight to Bartimaeus parallels his restoring humanity to

glory. Having been made whole by Christ, human nature can now follow Christ on the road to the kingdom, symbolized by our lord's subsequent entrance into Jerusalem.”

And so, our gospel story is not actually about Jesus healing a blind man. Or at least that's what all of my biblical sources say. The story is just the author's way of saying that Jesus is the expected messiah. Perhaps that was an important message 2000 years ago in Palestine, but it's a bit hard to know how to get any traction from it today. Today, for Christians at least, we take that as a given.

The Worship committee requested a “normal” service today as it is my last service with you, but the lectionary reading is driving a different agenda. Given the nature of our text, I feel the need to preach a “word association” sermon. Do you know what I mean by a “word association” sermon? That's a sermon where you can't think of anything that relates to the content of a biblical story, so instead you just pick one word from the story and go from there. For example, if the word “donkey” is in the story, then you talk about donkeys for awhile. To my knowledge, I've never *ever* preached a word association sermon because I really don't like them. I prefer to dig into the meaning of the story, not the words individually. But life is full of new challenges, right? Besides, when did I ever give the worship committee what they asked for? So today, let's play “word association” with the word, “sight”.

Imagine that you had to lose one of your senses. What sense would you select to live without? According to an extremely detailed and very scientific study - OK - according to an audience survey on the game show "family feud", people would choose to lose their senses in this order, most popular to lose to least popular: smell, taste, touch, hearing, sight. Personally, if I had to select a sense to lose I'd pick a different sense, like my sense of direction, my sense of humour, or my sense of righteous indignation. Or perhaps I could give up my fashion sense, except that you can't give away what you don't possess.

But normal people apparently would select sight as the last sense that they would choose to lose. People like sight. People value sight. Even good old Bart, in our gospel story today - when Jesus asks him “what would you like me to do for you?” - Bart says

that he wants his sight back. Being a blind beggar, he could have asked for money, or for retribution on the citizens who had looked down on him for years. But Bart chose sight. When we are not sure what to think about something, we sometimes say “seeing is believing”. I have never heard anyone say, “smelling is believing”, even though that might be very appropriate if the issue is whether or not dinner is ready. And why is it that sometimes, when we end a phone call, we say “see you later” when we can't even see each other at that moment ... forget about later.

I think we are biased to favour sight above our other senses. We do seem to favour sight. We favour it in surveys, we favour it in our common language. Which raises the obvious question: What is so great about sight anyway?

Have you ever had a glimpse of something, and that brief glimpse excited you, and then you started to imagine what the whole thing you have only glimpsed looks like. And then - later - you actually see the whole thing, and you are disappointed. Or perhaps you've had the experience of seeing a building - say a hotel - from the outside. The building looks inviting and friendly, and you start to imagine what your room will look like, and as you enter the lobby, check in, and wait for the elevator your anticipation builds. But when you open the door and walk into your room you are disappointed because the room is not friendly or inviting? Sight can be very misleading.

Advertisers take full advantage of this of course. Take a look at this package. From the outside, based on the picture, we are led - by our sight - to expect the food within to be a gastronomic delight, or at least passable eating. But does anyone here want to actually see the contents? I know that I don't. Because I know that the packaging looks far better than the contents will. I won't even offer to let anyone taste this! And I'm not picking on this one food manufacturer of course. This is the essence of human nature. Sight is a powerful sense, and therefore it can bring us great joy, but it can also be a powerful deceiver. Sight is powerful, but imagination is even more powerful.

[share stories about sight and reality not matching up]

On balance - handy though it is, great though it is, useful though it is - sight is perhaps not the ultimate sense. Sight can be deceiving, sometimes, and so we need something better, something more accurate, something more sensitive, something more profound. Sometimes, we don't need sight. We need insight!

Take our church for example. Sight might tell us that we have no classic church building. Sight might tell us that we need to find a new minister. Sight might tell us that we are a small group of people. Sight might lead you to conclude that we are not worth a look-in.

But what does our insight tell us? Insight might tell us that we are a dedicated bunch of people. Insight might tell us that we have a vision and a heart for community engagement. Insight might tell us that our music is awesome. Insight might tell us that we enjoy each other and care about each other. Insight might tell us that this is a place where the spirit of God is at work.

Wesley Mimico United Church is a bit like packaged frozen food. Except, the other way around. Our packaging and our reality do not match, but in our case, it is the packaging that is less attractive. But the contents of our church - that's us, our community, and the presence and grace of God - is worthwhile.

Sight might tell us that everything here is changing. Insight tells us that what we truly value is still with us and will remain with us. Whatever changes may happen, we are still Wesley Mimico United Church.

Thank you for being you.

Amen.