Sunday, October 26, 2003
BLIND SPOTS
Mark 10:46-52

When I was learning to drive a truck on the farm many years ago, one of the first things my dad taught me was that in using rearview mirrors, there are blind spots. He said, “You will look in the mirror and you will be tempted to think you are seeing all that needs to be seen. It may appear to you that all is clear, but that mirror is limited in what it can reveal to you. It has its blind spots.” Later, I learned that I also had my own kind of blind spots. These blind spots were not only in my physical ability to see. I also discovered that everyone has his or her own variety of blind spots.

The story you heard today from Mark’s gospel is about a man named Bartimaeus, a blind beggar. The story implies that he had one large blind spot — he was totally blind in a physical sense, yet he clearly saw what others did not see. He saw who Jesus was and believed Jesus could help him.

This is not the only story in the gospels about individuals who are blind and have their sight restored by Jesus. The early church remembered these stories, told them to each other over and over again, and then wrote them down not only because of the physical act of healing, but also because such stories carry a deeper meaning.

These stories help you to remember that clarity of vision is more than being able to see with your eyes. To be able to see clearly is also a metaphor that describes possession of knowledge, having understanding, being sensitive to one another, and being open to the working of God in one’s life and in the world. In the language of the Bible, people who are ignorant of God, or who refuse to know God, or think they know everything there is to know about God and how God works, are described as being blind or having blind spots and, worse yet, not realizing it.

In our language today, we often use the metaphors of sight and blindness. You might say, “She saw the light,” meaning that the individual came to a new understanding or had a change of perception. You might also say, “That’s a leader with vision,” and you mean more than that the person has 20/20 vision. Sometimes in a conversation, you will indicate that you understand by saying, “I see. I see.”

The point is that in the gospels, stories of the healing of the blind are never recorded only as acts of physical healing, but carry an additional, broader meaning of coming to understand more of God and the ways in which God works.

The story of Bartimaeus is about the restoration of sight to one who wanted to step out of his own personal darkness. It’s a story about a man who wanted to be full of life and part of the world. It’s a story about a person who wanted to be illumined in body and spirit. It’s a story about someone who was unafraid to ask to be healed of his blind spot, a man who was persistent in his request even when the people around him tried to get him to shut up. He kept shouting, “Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me.” Bartimaeus saw Jesus more clearly than any of those around him.

The more the crowd tried to get him to stop shouting, the more persistent he became. According to the story, Jesus heard his shouting and said, “Call him here.” Then he said to

Bartimaeus, “What do you want me to do for you?” It sounds like an odd question, but I think I understand why Jesus asked it. For some people, being physically blind is not the worst thing that can happen, especially if they have been born blind. There are studies of people today who have gained their sight after being blind from birth, and often there is a lot of confusion. They are unable to judge distances, and some fear the shadows. They cannot get used to the radiance of light and have to shield themselves from it. I’m told that some get very self-conscious about appearance, while others simply refuse to go out at all.

Jesus wanted the crowd to hear clearly his request for help. Some of the people in the crowd probably assumed that since he was a beggar, he was asking for food. Bartimaeus was very specific: “Teacher, let me see again.” His request implies that he had not been born blind. That’s why he said, “Let me see again.” Then a simple healing takes place—"Go, your faith has made you well.”

In addition to restoring his physical sight, I believe Bartimaeus was also asking for something more. His request included, “Clarify my vision, help me rediscover my life’s purpose.” That’s why he said, “Let me see again.” Like many people, he had lost his reason for living. Isn’t that what most people want? To find life’s purpose, to be able to see your way more clearly as you travel your life’s journey, to have your blind spots removed?

Though you might not be totally blind or even legally blind, you have your blind spots, and you are not alone. Here are some examples:

Some people have tunnel vision. They lack peripheral vision. They can never see the broader picture. They cannot see the forest for the trees. They have a narrow view of life. They tend to put everything and everyone in little boxes or categories. They wouldn’t dare ever color outside the lines or think outside the box. They refuse to examine their rigid basic assumptions. They cannot easily accept change, even when it is for the good. They prefer things as they are. They have no vision for the future except what is in the present.

I know people who have tunnel vision in their understanding of God. Even though they are mature adults, they still have a fourth-grade concept and vision of God. They see God only as being angry and filled with wrath. You can also have blind spots so that you are not open to ways God is working if it doesn’t fit your preconceptions and beliefs. A few weeks ago in a sermon, I talked about the blind spots of Jesus’ disciples, who wanted to stop a person who was healing people in the spirit of Jesus because he was not a part of their group.

I also know people who have blind spots in how they see themselves. Some are blind to their own weaknesses and temptations. They are blind to their own self-righteousness. Others have the opposite kind of blind spots. They see themselves as being of little or no account. They are not able to see their own gifts and abilities. They do not believe they can change, grow, and learn. They believe they are unacceptable even to God. They can’t imagine how God could possibly love them.

Some people have blind spots in the way they see others. They refuse to acknowledge that someone has changed. They refuse to admit that someone else might have talent or ability. You can even be blind to some of the abilities and skills of your own children. Teachers can be blind to the abilities of their students.

Today is Reformation weekend. Historically, it’s the time when many Protestant congregations remember their past as heirs of the Reformation of the 16th century, which started in 1517

when Martin Luther, a Roman Catholic priest, nailed his 95 theses on the door of the church in Wittenberg, Germany. This action was the result of Luther's lifelong struggle to gain a perfect faith, to get beyond the blind spots of his own doubts and struggles.

Luther was a religious obsessive. He was always looking for ways to perfect himself. He was constantly struggling with his life in the light of what he believed was God's judgment. He was filled with anxiety as to whether he was doing enough good works in order to earn God's favor.

You know how that is. Many people work at faith and end up feeling exhausted by the demands they place upon themselves. Maybe you are one of them. You worry about whether you are raising your children in the right way. You are anxious about whether or not you are paying enough attention to those around you. You worry if you are compassionate enough when it comes to the hungry, the homeless, and the poor. Maybe you also worry about the depth of your spiritual life. You might wonder, does faith make any sense at all?

Luther's blindness was removed when he came to a new understanding of a verse from Paul's letter to the church in Rome—"the just shall live by faith." He now understood this to mean the faithfulness of God in him, not his faith in God. God was not interested in whether he had the correct beliefs. He discovered God's complete acceptance of him. He was released from worry about his own salvation. He was released from his constant effort to attempt to earn God's love. Heretofore, Luther had been blind to the grace of God. Now he was healed of that blindness.

This is the most revolutionary doctrine of the Christian faith. It's not up to you to be perfect and perfectly faithful. God loves you and keeps loving you the way you are. You can be a blind beggar, nervous, worried, anxious, and God accepts you as you are. And this is the paradox: It is when you realize that you are accepted, no matter how broken you are, that you begin to know your wholeness and the unending grace of God.

There are so many forms of blindness and so many different kinds of blind spots.

Institutions can have their blind spots. Consider, for example, the pressure the Roman Catholic Church exerted on Galileo to force him to recant what the church called his false and heretical theory that the earth was not the center of the universe. In spite of the evidence, the church continued to teach that everything in the universe revolved around the earth instead of the earth and the other planets in our solar system revolving around the sun.

Consider also the church's blind spots in its treatment of women. Even today, there are churches that will not permit women to be ordained as ministers or priests or hold other leadership positions.

Our nation recently celebrated the 40th anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I have a Dream" speech. We have made a lot of progress since then in overcoming racism, and there is still more to be done. When Dr. King was preaching and leading protests in the '60s, many of the people I knew were shaking their heads and complaining about all the trouble he was causing. Some were blind to the fact that racism even existed. Decades later, this "trouble-maker" is a martyr and a hero, whose birthday is a national holiday. I continue to be amazed at our collective blindness to the effects of racism and poverty in those days. Many of the young people I talk with today shake their heads at the stories of segregation in schools, restaurants, and doctor's offices, unable to believe such things took place in their parents' lifetimes.

The blindness that teaches that one group of people is inferior or superior because of the color of their skin has caused more innocent suffering than almost any other kind of blindness.

When we are healed of our blind spots, the troublemakers become heroes. Ideas and practices that once seemed revolutionary eventually become beloved traditions. As a society, we are always moving from blindness to having our sight restored.

On the other hand, we still have our vision problems. We need to be aware of the inherited blindness of each generation, which so often assumes that it is the best generation of all, with no blind spots, with no lessons to learn, only an inheritance to enjoy. This arrogance is the cause of our blind spots.

On my annual visits to the eye doctor, I'm always given a vision test to determine if my vision has changed. Then I know whether or not I need a new prescription for the glasses I wear.

I'm convinced that you and I also need another kind of vision test that we take regularly to determine what blind spots we might have. Here's my version of that kind of vision test. Ask yourself these questions:

1. Are you open to considering that God might work in ways that you have not heretofore imagined?

2. Are you willing to acknowledge that all human beings are created in God's image and that therefore God loves everyone as much as God loves you, even your enemies?

3. Are you willing to re-examine your assumptions about people you are having difficulty with so that you might see them in a different light? God might be working through them in ways you hadn't considered.

Amen.