



Seeing Clearly

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Mark 8:22-26

This is a significant Sunday for our church: the first without our beloved, longtime pastor Pete James. I'll have more to say about that later, but I chose today's text for this occasion. Listen for God's word to you.

“They (Jesus and the disciples) came to Bethsaida and some people brought a blind man and begged Jesus to touch him. He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village; and when he had put saliva on his eyes and laid his hands on him, Jesus asked him, ‘Can you see anything?’ And the man looked up and said, ‘I can see people, but they look like trees, walking.’ Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he looked intently and his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. Then he sent him away to his home, saying, ‘Do not even go into the village’” (Mark 8:22-26).

My younger brother recently had cataract surgery. When I reached out to find out how it went he said, “I was blind but now I see.” Throughout history, and even today, many suffer from the inability to see and don't have the resources for surgery or even glasses to help them see clearly.

Our passage for today is about the healing of a blind man. Today, many blind people can learn to live independently, but in Jesus' day, they had to depend on others. Friends take this blind man to Jesus who leads him out of the village, puts saliva on his eyes, and lays his hands on him. Then he asks if

he sees anything. He does see, but it's out of focus. Jesus lays his hands on his eyes again and "his sight was restored and he saw everything clearly."

This account is only found only Mark. It's the only healing Jesus did in two stages. Why? It certainly reveals Jesus' power to heal physical blindness, but Jesus is also concerned with spiritual blindness. Jesus knows his disciples also need a double healing. It will be a slow, messy process before they see clearly who Jesus is and what he came to do.

The passage you heard in our call to worship actually follows the healing of this blind man. Jesus asks the disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" The reports are very favorable.

But then Jesus asks the disciples, "Who do *you* say that I am?" Peter jumps in and says, "You are the Messiah." He gives the right answer, which is quite remarkable. Until this point, the disciples had referred to Jesus as rabbi or teacher. So this is good. They see clearly *who* Jesus is, but they don't yet know what that means.

Most first-century Jews absolutely believed the Messiah would come, and their understanding was that he would be the true King of Israel who would free God's people from foreign rule and establish them once again as a nation.

Jesus warns the disciples not to tell anyone because the time is not right, but also because they do not yet see clearly or understand what it is that he as the Messiah is going to do. This becomes painfully clear as the conversation goes on.

When Jesus begins to reveal his mission—that he must suffer and die—Peter rebukes Jesus and attempts to redirect him away from his mission to go Jerusalem to suffer and die on the cross. Peter's resistance and reaction reveals his blindness.

It's important to understand that Peter was a sincere believer and devoted follower of Jesus, but his desire was distorted in that he wanted to fit Jesus into the box of his own making, his own understanding. He is actually trying to manipulate Jesus to get on board with his tightly held personal, religious, and political agenda. Think what it must have meant to Peter and the other disciples to have Jesus on their team, on their side. Jesus had the power not only to do miracles but to overthrow their enemy and free God's people from the oppression of Rome.

Peter is blind not only to what Jesus is going to do but also to what is in his own heart. He is looking to save his life, protect his interests, get what's coming to him. Suffering was not a part of the plan. If we're honest, it rarely is for any of us.

We are more like Peter than we care to admit. We, too, have an idea of who Jesus is and what he will do for us. We are often more focused on ourselves and our agenda than on God and His agenda. We have ways of arranging our lives in such a way that we control people and circumstances around us to meet our needs for security, safety, significance, success, and status.

Like the disciples, we want gain without pain; we want the resurrection without going through the grave, we want life without experiencing death, we want a crown without going by way of the cross. Most of us need our blindness to be healed so that we can see clearly that in God's economy, the way up is down.

Jesus confronts Peter's resistance and reactions. He will not be manipulated by anyone else's agenda or deterred from his mission. He says, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

But that's not all. Jesus goes on to call the crowd with the disciples and say to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." What does it mean to deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow Jesus?

In her book *Brokenness*, Nancy Lee DeMoss explain it well: “It means that we must be willing to die to our own interests, die to our own reputation, die to our own rights, die to our own ways of doing things, die to our own comfort, convenience, hopes, dreams, and aspirations. To ‘die’ means to lay it all down. To give it all up. To let it all go. This may seem difficult, perhaps even unthinkable, to our self-protective, individualistic, rights-oriented minds. But, as Jesus went on to tell his disciples, ‘For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.’”

I confess that for many years I felt discomfort when reading Jesus’ harsh words to Peter, a man who had given up a lot to follow Jesus. But my own journey of faith has brought me to a place of realizing how much these words needed to be said and to be heard—not just by Peter and the other disciples but by me and all of us who would follow Jesus. There is a great human tendency and temptation to put God in the box of our own understanding and experience. We, too, are blind and need a second touch from Jesus to see clearly.

About 20 years ago I began to wake up to my blindness and need for deep healing and transformation. I was walking through a difficult period of pastoral transition with my church along with personal challenges. I was physically, emotionally, and spiritually drained.

On Good Friday that year, it all came to a head. The new senior pastor led us in an exercise of writing our sins on pieces of flash paper and nailing them to the cross. I knew exactly what to write, as the Lord had been convicting me of perfectionism and hyper-responsibility.

The Lord was healing my blindness, helping me to see my behavior for the sin it was. I thought I was trusting God. I was working hard, trying to do the right thing, trying to love and serve God and people. But trying hard isn't the same as trusting.

I didn't have the language yet, but I began to see the trappings of my "false self," which is relying on human abilities and resources. In contrast, the "true self" radically trusts God.

It was about this time that I began to meet with a spiritual director, and read books about and take classes on spiritual formation. And I also learned about the tool of the Enneagram, which the Lord has used so much to help me see clearly what I had not been able to see or understand about myself.

Like Peter, I was a sincere, devoted disciple of Christ. I had been walking with the Lord for 20 years and was a pastor, for heaven's sake. But I had been blind to how my hard work and diligence was getting in the way of radically trusting God

by letting go and letting God do in, and through, and for me what only He could do by His love, His grace, and His power.

This period of my life was challenging, messy, and painful, but I did experience a kind of second touch from Jesus. I had to let go of my blindness, take up my cross, and die to those false, self-reliant strategies that were so ingrained in me. But as I learned to let go and let God, I began to live and minister more freely and lightly in the unforced rhythms of His grace.

Of course, I have had hundreds, even thousands, of touches by Jesus since then. The journey of becoming like Christ is one that continues until we see our Lord face to face, but that season was a turning point in my life that I could say, “I was blind but now I see.”

Now, 20 years later, I have a new set of personal challenges and am a part of another pastoral transition. We all are. As I said, this is a significant Sunday for us at VPC as our longtime pastor, Pete James, has now retired from this church. I’m grieving the loss of his leadership and already miss his presence a lot.

And now we are in a new stage of our transition as we await news and the arrival of a new senior pastor. I have been asked to fill a new role as interim head of staff. It’s not one I

expected or even wanted, but I do feel called and well suited to step into the gap. But let's be clear, I am no Pete James. If you know me at all, you know that. And let's also be clear that I am not the senior pastor. Someone else is coming to fill that role.

As I was thinking about this period of transition for me and our church, the image of a flying trapeze artist came to mind. It may feel like we're hanging in midair after letting go of our beloved pastor and now waiting for the new senior leader. And it's in this in-between time that anxiety, fear, frustration, even anger and hosts of other emotions can come to the surface. Like the disciples, we, too, may notice resistance to letting go of the way things were and/or reactions that reveal that we don't like the way things are going.

Henri Nouwen learned a valuable lesson from a friend who was a trapeze artist. He writes, "The flyer is the one who lets go, and the catcher is the one who catches.... The flyer must never try to catch the catcher" (*Sabbatical Journey*). The flyer's job is to wait in absolute trust. The catcher will catch him, but he must wait.

Please understand. It is never another person, not even a senior pastor, who catches us, but God alone. We wait for God alone. We trust God alone.

Resistance and reactions are understandable, but they are not helpful. We have to let go, we have to hang in the air, we have to wait. This isn't just true in pastoral transitions, it's a principle of life. And it's in that hanging, waiting space we learn to radically trust God.

Of course, we are not only dealing with a pastoral transition, it's been almost a year since we have been dealing with a worldwide pandemic, hanging in the air waiting for vaccines to be developed and now delivered so we can get back to the lives we once knew.

Like many of you, I have personally been in a season of waiting for schools to open, waiting for healing to come, waiting for decisions to be made. Here is the good news: it is in the time of waiting—when we feel out of control—that God is with us working behind the scenes, healing our blindness, so we can see clearly and trust Him more.

I don't know about you, but I don't want to gut it out and just get through the months ahead. I want this to be a significant season of transformation for me and for all of us in this church. God is doing something, and we can choose to come to Jesus to allow him to touch, heal, and transform so that we can see clearly.

How do we do that? I'll give you four words or phrases: look, listen, let go, and let God.

First, *look*. Jesus is Lord and Scripture is our authority. So we look to Jesus and his word for the help we need. We can't change what we can't see, so pray, "Open my eyes, Lord, and help me to see what I need to see."

Then we look at our lives. In the midst of transition or stress, our inner resistance and outward reactions can become more pronounced, exposing our blindness to the old default patterns of our false self. It's easy to deny, justify, or blame others or circumstances for our harsh words and actions. Instead, we need to take ownership. We need to look at our lives, see our sin and brokenness for what it is, and take responsibility for what we say and do.

Second, we *listen*—again to God and His word. But we also need to listen to others. We all have blind spots. They are called that because we don't know what they are. So ask trusted people to give feedback to help you see what you can't see. Once it's given, listen to it and heed it.

Once we look and listen and see the compulsions and constrictions of our brokenness and sinfulness, then we need to *let go* of our self-reliance and manipulative strategies. We

need to let go of managing life on our own so that we can experience the care and concern of God and of others.

Letting go of sin certainly involves confession and repentance. We also might seek to let go of certain relationships or activities in order to spend more time with God and with spiritual friends who share our faith values. I shared earlier how becoming a part of a community, taking a class, finding a mentor helped me learn to let go so that I could see more clearly.

Letting go of brokenness might mean recognizing our need and seeking help from others. This month we are highlighting our care ministries as we recognize the stress of pandemic fatigue and the challenge of transition. GriefShare, DivorceCare, and Stephen Ministry are means of letting go by receiving the support and encouragement of others.

Letting go is an act of trust that opens us to *let God* do in and through and for us what only He can do. Like the trapeze artist, we willingly let go and wait for God to catch us. This is radical trust in God alone.

I don't know what it means for you to let go and let God. But I do know that intentional practices, relationships, and experiences are the means of grace that help us to be fully present to God, ourselves, and others.

Over the past ten years, one of the practices that has been most helpful to me personally is renewing prayer. I go in knowing I'm blind, and I come out seeing more clearly. The process involves identifying and letting go of false beliefs that drive negative emotions and behaviors and then letting God transform us by His truth. Everyone can benefit from this prayer practice.

I am hopeful about the future God has for us as a church. This next year is going to be an ongoing season of transition. It will be hard in some ways, but it will also be very good as we learn to radically trust the God who loves us and is always with us. Our God is eager to heal our blindness to help us see clearly who He is and who we are in Him as His beloved children and faithful servants.