

“What Do You Want to See?”  
Jeremiah 31: 7 ó 9    Mark 10:46 ó 52  
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I like questions. But of course you already knew that. I believe that is one of the reasons I am so drawn to Jesus. He always asked good questions. In general, learning to ask questions is valuable to the spiritual life and, for that matter, to the quality of relationships. Asking questions is not necessarily about getting answers. While good questions do provide the possibility for some increase in information, their real value is in deepening relationships. In the classes I teach for people learning pastoral care, participants learn a communication technique called “Amplification”. Amplification is based in the notion that a good question can always help you learn more, no matter how much you already know.

It is important that we be careful about how we ask questions. We don’t want to ask questions that are intrusive, and determining which ones are appropriate questions depends largely on the nature of the relationship between the one asking and the one giving the answer. We also want to avoid “loaded questions”. A loaded question is one where you have already decided that you know the “correct” answer, so the question becomes a kind of test instead of an invitation for the other to provide new information.

As I said earlier, Jesus asks wonderful questions. In today’s Scripture reading, we heard about a blind man who was calling out to Jesus. Jesus then asked him “What do you want me to do for you?” Now, this might seem like an obvious question. I think, however, that the question goes deeper than the obvious. Jesus did not simply make the assumption that the blind man wanted his sight restored. He took a respectful approach that invited a relationship of collaboration with this man with regard to his healing. Practically speaking, Jesus directly invited the man to participate in his own healing. Well, as it turned out, the man did give the obvious answer, “Let me see again”. But then, Jesus reinforced the man’s own authority by telling him that his own faith had made him well.

I would love to see an expanded version of this encounter. I find myself wondering what else Jesus might have asked him. He might well have asked something like this, “When your vision is restored, what is it you want to see?” This, then, is a second question that I place before you today in this sermon. First, I want to know if you desire the ability to see clearly. And second, I want to know what you’re hoping to see with your new-found sight.

I realize that this might be a diversion from where sermons on this text usually go. Of course, by this time, that won’t surprise you. It is very tempting in reading this passage only to see the obvious miracle and to miss the even greater inner miracle. Sometimes it works the other way around with liberal thinkers. The moment the notion of a miracle comes up, there is a great tendency to ignore the rest of the story. I think that is usually a mistake because there are always deeper meanings present.

Remember that Mark, as a Gospel writer, does not let us look at this, or any other, text in a superficial way. As I have mentioned in previous sermons and classes, Mark is very intentional

about the order of the stories in his Gospel. I remind you that no two Gospels tell the story exactly the same way. So, if we look at the position of this specific story in the context of the whole Gospel account, we might learn some things. In this case, the story of the healing of this blind man directly precedes the accounts of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem and the final events leading to the cross.

So, the blind man says that he wants to see again. Can we take this as meaning that he wants to see truly what is going on, no matter how surprising or painful it might turn out to be? There is an implied question in this entire Gospel that we might not really want to see what is going on just as Jesus' contemporaries did not want to see the truth of Jesus' journey toward the cross. So, is this story, which seems to focus on the restoration of sight, primarily about the miraculous thing done to the man's eyes, or does it have a more metaphorical purpose, one that addresses the quality and purpose of vision?

The Jews in Jesus' day had a clear picture (or so they thought) of the functions of a Messiah. They expected a messiah who would be a rescuer and a conqueror, so that's what their eyes were prepared to see. With his stories and with his actions, Jesus invited people to see the meaning and purpose of the Messiah in a much broader sense.

But, would they be able to see beyond the limitations of their expectations? Would they be able to see and appreciate the creation of a "Realm of God" in their midst, one that did not depend on military actions or political reversals?

Now, it is clear from history that some people have been able to see and other people have not been able to see. Reality is actually not quite as black and white as that previous sentence might indicate, though. Broadness or narrowness of vision is a continuum. The question is not so much whether or not we can see, but how far, how deep, or how broadly we can see.

My point is this: for The Park Church, and any other congregation for that matter, it is essential to consider the quality of the shared vision.

At present, we are in the last phase of the interim period in this congregation. The church governance structure has been revised, the Search Committee has a draft church profile for the congregation to review, and before very long, the committee will begin receiving applications from prospective ministers. While this is all very exciting, it also means that the time is now for focusing in on the vision of ministry that a new minister and this congregation will follow together.

Just as he asked the blind man, in our imaginations Jesus is asking us what we really want from him. Are we asking for a magical cure that will simply restore the life of this congregation to what it was "back in the day"?

Or are we asking for the ability to hold a creative vision of ministry that is suited to the unique problems facing this community and the world? Do we really want to see clearly, even if that means seeing human conditions that we would rather not see, or following a path that does not take us where we want to go? Are we willing to follow the calling of Jesus, even if it goes in a

direction that seems counter to our hopes and our dreams? Believe me, I understand that these are not easy questions.

During much of the twentieth century, congregations, including this one, became very successful as institutions, but much of their success came from turning inwards. People made decisions about church membership and attendance by looking at what they got out of it, or by looking at the status that a particular congregation held in the community. Conflicts arose over particular theological beliefs and over particular ways of conducting worship. Counter to this, a movement arose about thirty years ago that encouraged congregations to unite with one another as much as possible. That movement failed, because individual groups did not want to risk giving up their traditions, buildings, and comfort.

From one perspective, that failure is understandable. Traditions, rituals, and even buildings are important. But another issue looms. What is the purpose of Christian practice in the first place? What is the vision Jesus promulgated when he talked about and acted consistently with the Realm of God. What did he see that his disciples failed to see? What was the quality of life and community that he promoted and that he calls his followers to promote in all times and places?

Those questions remain. While this is a congregation has a long history of activism and service to the community, it is still possible to get distracted by other concerns. These other concerns are not unimportant, but they can still distract from the essential vision of promoting the Realm of God.

I want to note briefly that while I have couched this sermon in Christian terms, it seems likely to me that Jesus did not insist on having the only voice to speak on behalf of healthy community. Religious fervor can sometimes obscure that fact. Clearly, many other religious voices express a similar vision of the Realm of God. And certainly in this congregation, there is room for a wide variety of voices to inform vision and ministry.

At this time of the year, in the season of budgets and giving, the temptation to be distracted from the vision of the Realm of God is great. So, I call upon you to not to lose touch with the fundamental purpose of this congregation and its ministry as you deal with the unavoidable, but necessary, nuts and bolts of The Park Church.