

## Blind Bart and Climate Change (Mark 10:46-52)

It seems like it has been quite a while since I have stood up here before you. We are finishing up the lectionary “year B” over the next four weeks. For those of you unfamiliar with it, the lectionary is a series of scripture readings that divides up the bible, more or less, into readings over three years, years A, B and C. Most of the mainline churches use the lectionary. Mark is the gospel that we have been hearing from this year. When Advent arrives at the end of November, we enter a new year of readings – year C. In year C we hear primarily from the gospel of Luke, another one of my personal favourites. I don’t know what I’m going to do when we come to the year in which the gospel of John is the focus. I’m not that crazy about the gospel of John.

So, this Fall, we have been hearing from Jesus as he journeys toward Jerusalem. During this time, he is desperately, desperately, trying to prepare his disciples for what is going to happen to him in Jerusalem. Three times he has revealed to them that he is the Son of Man, destined to be humiliated and die at the hands of the powers that be in Jerusalem. This is not only incomprehensible to the disciples, but also seems to inspire them to have all kinds of inappropriate conversations and thoughts about who is the greatest among them. Of course, Jesus, the ultimate teacher uses those opportunities to teach them, the growing crowd and those of us who are following him as readers, about what true greatness is; what true holiness is; what true discipleship is. He says ludicrous things like, the first shall be last and the last shall be first and stuff about people who wish to be great must be servants of all. Jesus says topsy-turvy unsettling things about welcoming the powerless and loving people more than things.

In today’s reading the traveling band are almost at Jerusalem. In fact, today’s story takes place in Jericho, where so long ago Jesus’ ancestors had made the walls come tumbling down as they moved into the land and called it “Israel.” This story of the healing of Bartimaeus takes place immediately (to use one of Mark’s favourite words) before the Palm Sunday parade. Jesus heals Bartimaeus and then he arrives in Jerusalem that same day on the donkey to meet his fate. There is a mood of foreboding in this passage, to be sure, because we know what is about to happen next, but primarily the flavour of this reading is great joy and celebration.

Jesus is walking along, not quite at the head of a parade, but certainly surrounded by many people. Blind Bartimaeus recognizes him, not by sight, but by some other way. People in our own day who are differently abled by visual impairment have a difficult time. In ancient times, their predicament was a whole lot worse. Bartimaeus would have been relegated to the edges as someone who was worthless or of no account. Part of the reason he would have been shunned is because, in the ancient world, it would have been assumed that he was being punished for some kind of major sin against God. Bartimaeus was not always blind. The text says he asked to be able to see *again*. Bartimaeus thus is asking to be restored.

Bartimaeus may be physically blind when the story begins, but he is not blind in the most important ways—the ways that count with God. Bartimaeus has 20/20 vision when it comes to seeing with his mind and with his soul. He gets who Jesus is and

what Jesus can do. In this, he stands in total contrast to the disciples. The disciples are mentally and spiritually blind. They just can not or are not able to comprehend who Jesus is and what will happen to him. But Bartimaeus can. "Son of David" he says, "Have mercy on me." (10:47-48) Not once, but twice he shouts it out. This is something new in Mark. Not the shouting but what is shouted. The writer of Mark does not like using the term "Son of David." It is a term, unlike "the Son of Man" (which is often used in Mark), that reveals Jesus as a descendent of King David. It is a name that indicates Jesus is the Messiah. The crowd seems to think it is ridiculous and/or annoying and so shush him, just like shushed the woman with the hemorrhage who touched Jesus' gown. Just like they shushed the children and their parents who sought blessing from Jesus. But Bartimaeus won't give up. He is a man on a mission. His calls to Jesus get louder and louder. Finally, Jesus turns around to face him. Something then comes over the crowd. They change. Instead of ordering Bartimaeus to shut up, now they say, "Hey, take heart, buddy, he's coming over."

Jesus comes over, listens to what Bartimaeus wants and then declares that Bartimaeus has regained his sight. Not because of anything Jesus has done. Jesus merely facilitates the healing, like a conduit. He says the man is responsible for his own healing. "Your faith has made you well" (10:52). Done. Due to his persistence, his belief that he was entitled to be whole despite what all of society told him, due to his confidence in the power and message of Jesus, Bartimaeus, the man, is healed.

I think about Bartimaeus, sitting by the road side, day after day begging for food, a grueling day to day subsistence survival. He must have thought, "If only I could see, then I could work in someone's carpentry business, or quarry business or inn or anything other place except in this filthy street begging." He must have thought, "Man, if only I could see, people would stop judging me as having committed some great sin against God." Or perhaps, "If only I could see I would be allowed in church (the temple) again. If only I could see, I would visit my family, have a girlfriend, get married and have children of my own. If only I could see, I would become part of the established order of this town of Jericho and finally have a life that other people respect."

But what does he do? (And this is the most important part of the story). After Bartimaeus says, "My teacher, let me see again." Jesus says to him, "Go, your faith has made you well." (10:51-52). Immediately after he regained his sight he follows Jesus on the way. Despite all of the things he might have dreamt about doing, longed to do, ached to do - he chooses to follow Jesus. He is free to go anywhere but he chooses to follow the itinerant, poor preacher from Nazareth. He gets who Jesus is. His response to restoration and healing is to follow Jesus on that trouble filled road to Jerusalem. He chooses to follow that crazy guy who advocates turning the world upside down. He chooses a life of challenge, discomfort and change. He chooses the path of radical love. He chooses it, because he SEES who Jesus is. And he saw that long before his sight was restored.

This story of joy, of restoration, of challenge and of change is as much about the willful, contrived blindness of the disciples as it is about Bartimaeus. The disciples have every opportunity to see, but they choose not to. Alex Roberts is a former statistics teacher who wrote an opinion piece in the Chronicle Herald, October 27, 2006, about the use of statistics or rather the non-use of statistics to be willfully blind – to choose not to see. He cited an article in the medical journal the Lancet – arguably one of the most reputable medical journals on the planet. Scientists from

the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, using well established scientific sampling methodologies that have been scrutinized by many experts and declared as valid, came up with a very grim figure for the number of civilian fatalities thus far in the war in Iraq. 655,000 “excess deaths.” (Approaching a million!). The response from the White House and the pentagon? “Not true, Not valid. We think it is closer to 30,000 to 50,000.” When asked how they came up with this number, they had to admit it was cobbled together and essentially fudged because they have, as policy, decided not to count the civilian casualties. They do not want to know that information, so they do not gather that information. (Shades of “LALALALA- I Can’t Hear You!”)

This is the modus operandi in post 911 North America – we don’t know what we don’t want to know. Never has the disastrous effects of choosing such a policy been so evident that it has been during the last 5 years as our planet warms up. Republican and Conservative governments have never wanted to know about the reality of how sick the planet is getting because they do not want to do the math and tell corporations the terrible news. They do not want to have to choose. They do not want to have to face the music. Only after the reality of Hurricane Katrina hit did the governments and powers that be in North America finally acknowledge that global warming is happening.

The Yates’ try once a month or so to go out for supper as a family and then take in a movie. One of those movies was “An Inconvenient Truth” by Al Gore. Mr. Gore lays out in relentless detail after detail the science indicating the terrible extent to which we are in planetary trouble. Layering fact after fact it becomes impossible to be blind to the reality that this trouble is directly due to the reckless disregard of industry, governments and all of us who relentlessly consume material possessions as our birthright. The blindness of George Bush Junior is stunning in its shortsightedness from a political point of view. He surely must have surrounded himself by people who deliberately blinded him. At that level of political power a person needs to be right sometimes just to survive. To be so very, very wrong is just not a good idea in the long haul. In other words, they set up their political enemy, Al Gore, to be so very, very right, something which, with a little foresight, could have been avoided.

The unwillingness of the extreme fundamentalist Christian movement to see this trend is a form of selective blindness that is frightening to me. I remember once having a conversation with someone from the Congregationalist church here in Halifax, a church which found its birth in the rejection of the 1988 decision by the United Church of Canada to ordain homosexuals. A very educated elder of the church told me that their minister had pointed out to the congregation that environmentalism was an act of unfaithfulness as a Christian. He said that it showed a lack of faith in the promise of God to create the earth anew after the Apocalypse. I was speechless, which, as you know is rare for me. It makes sense though that this form of fundamentalism which found its birth in the ultimate bastion of free market economies on the planet would conceive of the “disposable planet” end point. It is bizarre to me. Even entering into that very anthropomorphic understanding of God that fundamentalists have about God as Father handing out things, what makes them think that God will give them a new planet if they wreck this one? For example, if a parent gives their kid a television for their birthday and the kid smashes it with a brick and then says, “That’s okay Dad. I know you’ll give me a new one.” Is that the kind of good parenting a God as Father would do?

Faithfulness to God means practicing good stewardship of planet, no matter the spectrum of your Christian belief, fundamentalist or liberal. We have a narrow window of time to make change. We can no longer claim to be blind. We can see what is coming down the pipes and it is ugly. But, we must see.

Ironically, it might be this issue that finally brings Christian, Jews and Christians together. From October 29<sup>th</sup> to November 9<sup>th</sup> of 2001, in the rawness of the post 911 world, the World Council of Church sent a delegation to a Christian Muslim colloquium on religion and the environment. It was agreed that this is our new task together, to find ways to address climate change as a faithful people of vision. It was declared to be *the* major responsibility of all religions in this century.

The Globe and Mail newspaper is not known for being pro action on climate change. So I was pleasantly surprised when I began reading an op-ed piece by Margaret Wentz, October 26, 2006. Until, that is, I began to see her willful blindness. The highlight of the article was that Canada had 1% of the population of the planet but we make 2% of the emissions. Personally I found this a shocking statistic indicating great irresponsibility on the part of all Canadians. However, I was astonished to discover she thought that since we ONLY produced 2% of the world's emissions while the developing countries produced more, we therefore should not be required to take any action to reduce ours. Her point was essentially that doing so would wreck our economy. The upshot of her argument was that the planet will probably expire in 50 years given our current direction so we might as well be rich NOW. If all the other people who make up the other 98% of the earth feel the same, we are done. I hope that most of us are not that willfully blind.

“An Inconvenient Truth” describes in graphic terms the alarming trends that we are beginning to see in nature. There are troubling accounts of polar bears drowning for lack of sea ice and seals and walrus abandoning pups to the water. The increasing incidents of freakish weather and night photographs from space showing our hot earth are all things, quite frankly, I wish I had never seen. I can't get them out of my head. Al Gore's movie was a conversion experience for us. I have no choice now but to worry about the world we are giving to the grandchildren and great grandchildren I might or might never have. The problem is huge. If we had to rescue all of God's planet, individually and by ourselves, it would be impossible. It is a good thing that this is not what God expects of us. We are only responsible for that which we have power and influence over. Be forewarned, though, God expects those of us with more power and influence to have bear more responsibility for action. Having gone as a family, we collectively have both the pain and the hope of seeing. We are trying to do what we can do. We try to carefully consider our car use, our lighting and use of heat. Now when the boys leave lights on I shout out “Polar bears drowning! Polar bears drowning!” We plan to use of our votes and our voices. We are using what influence we have. That is what God expects of us.

For us as a community at St. John's, God requires of us the careful consideration of the use of this building. The very preliminary information that we have received from the Appreciative Inquiry process designed by your Futuring Team, is that you too, as a faithful people of God are concerned. This is good news. Your worry, however, has shifted from a primary emphasis on questioning the stewardship of the money you donate Church in terms of maintaining these buildings, built to accommodate a much larger congregation, to including now a concern about the stewardship of God's Creation. That is to say, it is one thing to not want money to go

into excessive heating expenses. It is another to know now that we are sinning against God when we do so, because we contribute to destroying God's beautiful earth. Thankfully, your Kairos group hears a call from God to address this and they will be keeping this issue before us. For my part, as your spiritual leader, I have decided that at the very least, in every service during the pastoral prayer we will pray for the health of God's planet, our earth, our home. God expects us to take responsibility for the things that we can do. God expects us to see the things we are responsible for seeing.

Environmental degradation is hardest on developing countries. Addressing environmental degradation, choosing to actually see the problem carries serious consequences and is most difficult for developing nations. Yet, some are choosing to see and act. Brazil, has reported that deforestation in the Amazon rainforest has declined to its lowest level since 1991 due to strict enforcement of environmental regulations. 13,097 square kilometers of rain forest were lost, the lowest level since 1991 (11,027 square kilometers). (Chronicle Herald, October 28, 2006). To be sure, there is still too much deforestation happening, but the Brazilians, at great short term cost to their local economies are doing it. They have chosen to see, even though seeing comes with a big price tag. There is hope, if only we could all choose to see.

Bartimaeus recognizes that with his new vision, he has some choices to make. He makes a surprising one. The road he chooses is hard and long but embarks on it nonetheless. Bartimaeus is named in this gospel, which is unusual for those who are healed in Mark. Not only is he named; his father is also named. This is because Bartimaeus is thought to have been known in the early church and of influence. He was probably one of the important early church guys, as were the disciples. Those disciples whom it is so tempting to feel superior to, do get it in the end, though. Those thick, willfully blind disciples do eventually see. They become brave, loving, creative church founders. Why? Because, the story doesn't end in Jerusalem. Jesus is resurrected. The Holy Spirit fills the church giving new visions and new dreams. Here we are 2000 years later, still worshipping in this big drafty church because a motley crew of imperfect, myopic but faithful men and women dared to dream big dreams and took some really big risks 2000 years ago. Sounds a lot like some people I know right now, in this place and in this time. It sounds a lot like you folks.