

The Last Sunday after the Epiphany

February 14, 2021

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Year B: 1 Kings 19:9–18; Psalm 27:5–11; 2 Peter 1:16–21; Mark 9:1–9**

In Mark, just before today’s gospel lesson, Jesus and his disciples were in Bethsaida. A blind man was brought to Jesus by others who cared for him. The evangelist says that they, “begged [Jesus] to touch him.”¹ But Jesus did not do so immediately. He took the man’s hand and led him outside the village—just the blind man and Jesus. Then, “When [Jesus] had spit on his eyes and laid his hands upon him, [Jesus] asked him, ‘Do you see anything?’ . . . ‘I see men; but they look like trees, walking’ . . . Then . . . [Jesus] he laid his hands upon [the man’s] eyes . . . he looked intently . . . and he saw everything clearly.”²

I’ve always read the passage to mean that Jesus was staring at the blind man. No. The definition of the Greek verb here includes to stare with eyes open, open one’s eyes wide, and to be able to see clearly.³ It was the man struggling to see, wanting to see, responding to Jesus’ touch.

¹ Mark 8:22.

² Mark 8:23–26

³ *A Greek-English Lexicon of New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (BDAG) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), *s.v.* “*διαβλέπω*,” 226.

I started thinking about these stories in relationship to today's gospel because of remarks by Professor Joel Marcus in his commentary on this gospel—my favorite commentary on Mark. He writes, “The blind man in this story still ‘gropes for the way,’ even though he has already received a measure of divine healing power.”⁴ Marcus goes on to write, “If . . . the blind man's intermediate state of seeing-yet-not-seeing corresponds to the disciples' position throughout the Gospel, to what does his final state of clear vision respond?”⁵

In Mark's account of Jesus' transfiguration, Peter, James, and John see but do not see. They have heard God speak. But they remain very much like the lame man in John whom Jesus encountered in the temple. There he sees a man who has been unable to walk for almost forty years. Jesus asks him, “Do you want to be healed?”⁶ The man tries to explain why he has not been healed. “Jesus said to him, ‘Rise, take up your pallet, and walk.’”⁷ But because it was a sabbath day, the authorities want to know who healed him. Jesus himself seeks out the man he had healed. After he

⁴ Joel Marcus, *Mark 8–16*, Anchor Bible 27A (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 601.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ John 5:7.

⁷ John 5:8–9.

learns that it was Jesus who healed him, he returns to the authorities and tells them. Though he knows Jesus' name, he doesn't know Jesus.

The greater healing story in John for me is the healing of the man born blind. As Jesus is leaving the temple with his disciples, he sees a man blind from birth: “[Jesus] spat on the ground and made clay of the spittle and anointed the man's eyes with the clay, saying to him, ‘Go, wash in the pool of Silo'am’ . . . he went and washed and came back seeing.”⁸

People who knew the man asked, “How were your eyes opened?”⁹ He replied, “The man called Jesus made clay and anointed my eyes and said to me, ‘Go to Silo'am and wash;’ so I went and washed and received my sight.”¹⁰ When pressured to denounce Jesus as a sinner, he refused. His neighbors and his parents do not defend him. But being cast out of the temple by the Pharisees is not the end of the story.

Jesus learns that the man has been driven out of the building that Second Isaiah, the Isaiah who writes after the return from exile, calls “a house of prayer for all

⁸ John 9:6–7.

⁹ John 9:10.

¹⁰ John 9:11.

peoples”¹¹—peoples, plural. Jesus finds the man who had been born blind and asks, “ ‘Do you believe in the Son of man?’ He answered, ‘And who is he . . . that I may believe’ Jesus said to him, ‘It is he who speaks to you.’ [The man] said, ‘Lord, I believe;’ and he worshiped him.”¹²

The journey to faith for Jesus’ disciples was not an easy one. On the way to Jerusalem, Jesus asks, “ ‘But you, who do you say that I am?’ Peter answered . . . You are the Christ.”¹³ Jesus turns next to explain what lies ahead for him, suffering, rejection, death, and after three days, resurrection.¹⁴ I think we can say Peter is speaking for the twelve when he begins to rebuke Jesus for his words. Jesus responds, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are not on the side of God, but of humans.”¹⁵

Then, he calls together the crowds with his disciples and teaches, “If anyone wants to follow after me, let him renounce himself and take up his cross, and let him follow me.”¹⁶ So when Jesus is arrested, the

¹¹ Isaiah 56:7.

¹² John 9:35–39.

¹³ Mark 8:29.

¹⁴ Mark 8:31.

¹⁵ My translation of *ἄνθρωπος*. Mark 8:33.

¹⁶ Translation: Marcus, 615.

disciples have a real fear that they will be next. They flee. They hide, even Peter, James, and John, the ones Jesus chose to see on the mountain before they die that “the dominion of God fully come in power.”¹⁷

I don't worry much at this point in my life about losing faith in the Lord Jesus. But anyone's mind can go to a terrible place of doubt when faced with evil or tragedy. After a certain age, most of us know periods of being lost and then being found by faith.

But I can't remember a time when I didn't know the name of Jesus. I think it was in my second year of college that, for a long while, I did not go to church very much. Friends took me to a church I turned out to like very much, Saint Paul's Memorial Church, the Episcopal parish across from the University of Virginia's original grounds. I found a church home.

I think our Anglican tradition at its best encourages everyone to take some real responsibility for his or her spiritual life as they are able. I think it mattered for the blind man's healing that he wanted to be healed, wanted to see the man who healed him. I think it matters for our journeys and the journey of the

¹⁷ Ibid., 635.

communities to which we belong that we take responsibility as we are able for what happens next. I am fond of a Bowen Family Systems Theory expression—Do not worry about your feelings; just do what you know is right.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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