

Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

To have any type of disability in first century Palestine not only meant financial hardship, but social segregation. Because Jesus' contemporaries did not understand the causes of disability and illness they assumed it was, to some degree, a curse sent by God in punishment for sins. They also thought the curse could be caught. So the blind, the lame, the crippled, the leper and the bleeder were desperately poor and socially outcast. Incredibly in our day, with all our supposed sophistication, some Christians have made similar statements about God cursing gay people with AIDS. Given the way Jesus acts toward those he encounters with illness, we know that God never sends disease as a curse for sin.

Bartimeaus is, however, a desperate man and in the story he acts desperately, calling out until he is heard. And in one of the strangest questions in the Gospel, Jesus asks a blind man what it is he wants. Maybe Jesus wants Bartimeaus to name his deepest desire. Maybe Jesus knows that it is, often, the unseen hurt that is the most diseased and needs healing first. Whatever of his motives, Jesus' question gives the man dignity.

As Bartimeaus considers his options, he hears the voices of those he might have to look at if he regains his sight. The poor remind him that, "once before you could see and what you saw disgusted you." The hungry ask, "do you have the courage to experience and share my hunger?" The elderly inquire whether he wants to see those "put away because we remind you of the frailty of life." The captives challenge him to see those "unjustly bound and oppressed." And finally the Self wants to know, "Are you willing to look inside yourself to see your beauty and ugliness, darkness and light?" It's a gripping scene.

It reminds us all that sight, and the insight that can come from what we see, bestows on us the dignity of having options and the responsibility to do something about what we behold. We cannot, however, let ourselves off the hook in regard to seeing the world as it is and doing something about creating a better vision of humanity for everyone, everywhere.

In this Eucharist, then, the same question is put by Jesus to us, "What do you want me to do for you?" And if our answer is to have sight or insight, then let's also pray for the courage to shoulder the responsibility that comes with every gift.

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