

Seeing Clearly
Mark 8:22–26
Sunday, May 22, 2022 (Easter 6)

Let us pray: Living God, I pray on behalf of us all, “Open my eyes that I may see glimpses of truth thou hast for me...Silently now I wait for thee, ready, my God, thy will to see. Open my eyes, illumine me, Spirit divine!” Amen.

Everyone has a story. I don’t just mean that everyone has a story they can tell about some particular *incident* that happened to them, although we all certainly have those. What I mean is that each of our lives, the *whole* of our lives, from beginning to now to the end, tell a story. Our lives are not just a series of random, unconnected experiences. If we step back and look at them, they form a narrative, the story of our lives. They don’t just tell *what happened* to us. They tell *who we are*. How we *understand* ourselves. And one of the most important things that we can do is to find that narrative; to figure it out and understand it and be able to say, “Here’s my story. *This* is who I am.”

Pastor and author Brian Zahnd talks about his life in terms of Jesus turning water into wine. He uses that story in John’s gospel of Jesus’ first miracle at a wedding in Cana of Galilee, where they had run out of wine, and Jesus transforms water into wine to keep the party going. And the chief steward (like the wedding coordinator) comes to the groom and says, “Everyone always serves the good wine first, and then when the guests are drunk, they serve the cheap wine. But you have saved the good wine until now!”

Zahnd, in his 60s now, talks about how he has always had *faith* (since he was 17), but that faith was kind of thin and weak, like cheap wine. And it was starting to run out. But at a point in his 40s, he started feeling like there was something *more*. Something *deeper* and *richer*. He talks

about the transformation that he experienced, where he came to this new understanding of life and faith and Jesus. He calls it a *vintage* faith, like vintage wine, but also vintage in the sense that it is connected to the ancient faith of Christianity. And he says, “Jesus has saved the *best* until *now*.” Jesus transformed *him*, his *faith*, from water to wine and kept the party going. He sees *his* story reflected in that story of Jesus. It helps him understand who he is and make sense of his own story.

I’ve heard him tell that story several times, and he’s even written a book about it called *Water to Wine*. About five months ago, when I was on leave, he preached a sermon on it, and that sermon got me wondering, “What’s *my* story?” Jesus turning water into wine, that’s *his* story, but what’s *mine*? Where do I see *my* story reflected in the story of Jesus? What part of *Jesus*’ story helps me make sense of my *own* life, from the beginning until now?

I started reading through the gospels, specifically looking for that – where do I find myself in this story? And on February 1, I came across this short, five-verse story of Jesus healing the blind man of Bethsaida. There are *other* stories in the gospels of Jesus healing people who are blind, but *this* one is only found once, in Mark’s gospel. It is not included in the lectionary cycle (the calendar of assigned scripture readings for each Sunday), so we hardly, if ever, read it here together. But this blind man – whose name we do not know – has a story to tell. A lot of the blind people that Jesus heals are people who were *born* blind; it specifically tells us that. But *this* man was *not*, because he knew what *trees* look like (he says, “I see people, but they look like trees walking”), and it says that his sight was *restored*. For something to be *restored* it has to have existed in the first place. So this was a man who *could* see, but then at some point he *lost* his vision, and then had his eyes opened (more than once) by Jesus. I could relate to that.

When I was 15, we realized that I needed to get glasses. I was having trouble seeing the chalkboard at school. I was really having to squint and strain. And I remember leaving the eye doctor with my first pair of glasses and being absolutely blown away because I could see the *individual leaves* on the trees. Up until then I guess the trees had just looked like one big fuzzy blur of green. But now it was like I was seeing in high definition, back before we knew what HD was. It felt like I was seeing it all for the first time.

But I grew up in Florida, where there is a considerable amount of humidity. And so every time I would walk outside, get out of the car, whatever, my glasses would instantly fog up. I got tired of that after a few years, so when I was 19, I got contacts. (I also had to get a stronger prescription, because my vision had kept getting worse.) But now with contacts, they didn't fog up in the humidity, so I could see all the time that I had them in. And they didn't have frames like glasses where I couldn't see anything outside of them. I could see *everything*.

But my vision kept getting worse and worse over the years, my prescription having to get stronger and stronger. Until finally, six years ago, I got laser surgery. And I'll never forget, as I was lying on the table, the doctor cut the little flap that they have to open, and one eye just went completely dark, like it was closed. I thought, "I sure hope *that* comes back!" It did, but it came back blurry, like I was underwater. Same thing with the other one. So for that first day, I couldn't really see that well. But when I woke up the next morning, I looked across the room, and I could read the *time* on the *clock*. It was the first time in over 20 years that I did not have to put on glasses or contacts in order to *see* in the morning. I just opened my eyes, and it was all right there. It was *life-changing*. The first time in over 20 years that I could really see clearly.

I've been noticing lately, though, over the past couple of months, that I'm having trouble seeing up close. Things are starting to get blurry again, so it's time to go back in for a touch-up. Being able to see clearly for me has not been an all-at-once, one-and-done thing. It is a *process* that has taken time and it still ongoing. Like this blind man that Jesus healed, I have had to have my vision restored again and again. And I'm not just talking about my eyes.

I grew up going to church and saying my prayers each night, but when I was 16 and going through an incredibly difficult time where it seemed like everything was falling apart. I couldn't see any hope or possibility of a future. So I turned to God in a moment of sincere desperation and genuine trust. I was praying in my room alone one night, down on my knees, when I had an experience of the presence of Christ. It was like Jesus was right there in that room with me – no bright light or anything, just *presence* – and I heard the voice of Christ say to me, “I am with you. You are going to be okay.” And my eyes were opened to Christ's presence with me and love for me. I had always *known* that, but now I *saw it* in a whole new way.

Then five years later, I started discerning a call to ministry. But I had all the excuses of why I couldn't do that. “I don't know enough about the Bible. I'm not *holy* enough (whatever *that* means).” I finally worked up the courage to tell my best friend about it. I said, “I think that God wants me to be a pastor. But that can't be right,” and then I listed all my excuses, hoping that he would agree. But he said, “Patrick, God will give you everything you need to do what God is calling you to do.” And my eyes were opened again, as I started down that new path.

Around five years later, I was the pastor of a church in Nebraska when Jen and I lost our first child, our daughter Maddie, and then another a year later. And it was like the lights went out. Everything that I had always been taught and believed about God and life and faith didn't work

anymore. I could not see any sign of Christ's presence with me or love for me. But then I read *Velvet Elvis* by Rob Bell, and then *The Irresistible Revolution* by Shane Claiborne, and then *A Generous Orthodoxy* by Brian McLaren, and *The Naked Now* by Richard Rohr, and I came to see a new way of knowing and following Christ; a new way of understanding life and faith. My eyes were opened again to Christ's presence with me and love for me.

A few years after *that*, Christ opened my eyes *again*, as I came to a new understanding of grace and how to love and accept people as they *are* and not as I think they *should* be. And then six months ago, after two years of stress and anxiety had brought me to a place where I had lost my vision and could not see clearly, Christ opened my eyes again. I had a *new* experience of Christ's presence with me and love for me and came to a new understanding of what it means to be a *pastor*. And I know that I'm not *done*. That seems to be the story of my life, that Christ opens my eyes again and again and again, and each time I see a little more clearly.

That's one of the remarkable things about this story of Jesus healing the blind man. Every other miracle, it's like Jesus does something and *boom*, it's *done*. One time. Raising Lazarus from the dead, he called out once, and Lazarus walked out of the tomb. Turning water into wine, he didn't have to keep trying that again. Multiplying the loaves and fish, he did that more than once, but it worked the first time, every time. Even just a chapter earlier, Jesus heals a man who was deaf and mute. It says that Jesus said, "Ephphatha (be opened)," and *immediately* his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. *Immediately*.

But this blind man. Jesus lays his hands on him and asks him, "Can you see anything?" Jesus didn't know the answer to that. He was *really* asking him. "Did it *work*? Can you *see*?" And the man says, "Well, I can see *people*, but they look like *trees* walking around." So Jesus has to

lay his hands on him *again*. The first time didn't work! He was no longer *blind*, but he didn't really *understand* what he saw. So Jesus had to try again. A lot of biblical scholars think *that's* why this story is not included in any of the other gospels; because it shows a Jesus who is "not perfect." But I don't think that's it at all.

I think that what this story shows us is that a life of faith and discipleship is a *process*. It is *not* a once-and-done thing. It is about having our eyes opened again and again by Christ and seeing a little more clearly each time. That's what happened with the *disciples*. This story is at the midpoint of Mark's gospel, and all up until now, the disciples *just don't get it*. They don't really understand who he is. I mean, in the verses immediately before this story, Jesus says to them, "Do you still not perceive or understand? Do you have eyes and fail to see? Do you not yet understand?"

Then Jesus heals this blind man, and in the very *next* verses, Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" His disciples say, "Some people say you're John the Baptist, others Elijah or one of the prophets." Then Jesus says, "But who do *you* say that I am," and Peter says, "You are the Messiah." His eyes had been opened to who Jesus was. But then Jesus tells them that he is going to suffer and die and after three days be raised, and it says that Peter took him aside and rebuked him. Jesus rebukes *him* and says, "You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Peter's eyes have been opened, but he still doesn't fully understand what he's seeing.

A little later, Jesus is transfigured, and they see the very glory of God shining forth from him, but they *still* don't fully understand. Even after Jesus rises from the dead, there are these stories that talk about how Jesus was right there with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him.

Jesus' own disciples, the people who were closest to him, had to go through a continual process of having their eyes opened to who he really is.

So if you can't see right now, don't let that deter you. Just come to Christ and ask him to open your eyes. And if you think you *can* see pretty clearly right now, there might be something *even better* ahead. Stay open to it. It's a *process*, and that process will not be done until we behold Christ face to face in the glory of his kingdom. Like Paul says, "now we see in a mirror, dimly, but *then* we will see face to face. Now we know only in part, but then we will know fully, even as we are fully known."

Like this blind man, we are constantly in the process of having our eyes opened by Christ. It says that Jesus "laid his hands on him again, and he looked intently...." It's easy to read that and think it's referring to *Jesus*, that *Jesus* looked intently. But it's referring to the blind man. Jesus laid his hands on him, and the blind man looked intently, and then his sight was restored. Just imagine that. The blind man looked intently, and the first thing he saw when his sight was restored was the face of Jesus.

I don't know about you, but I want *that*. I want to *look intently* at the face of Jesus, so that my eyes are opened, and I see everything clearly. That is not something we have to wait for. The blind man didn't wait until his sight was restored before he looked intently at the face of Jesus. He looked intently even *before* he could see clearly. I think that is what a life of faith is – looking intently at the face of Christ with the *hope* that our eyes might be opened, our sight might be restored, and we might see everything, all of this, clearly.

Look intently at the face of Jesus. Fix your eyes on him, through prayer, through the reading of scripture, and through serving your neighbor, and you will *see*. Oh, the things you will see. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.