

Mark 8:22-26 "Blindness is Contagious" Rev. Janet Chapman 9/8/24

The past couple weeks of vacation have been somewhat a remake of the movie "Planes, Trains, and Automobiles," which have made me quite grateful to come home, and I guess that is one of the purposes of vacation - to appreciate what you have in your own backyard. The train portion of my travels from NYC to DC was pretty but filled with curious passengers asking about my daughter's dog with the broken leg, which meant a lot of talking and not much window gazing. At one point, we went thru a tunnel which placed us in complete darkness and I thought how peaceful it was at that moment until a child behind us began to scream wildly. For those who aren't used to being in the dark, it can be scary business. A story is told about two young boys taking their very first train ride. For the trip, their grandma had bought them special superfizzy candy that practically explodes in your mouth. One of the boys, the older one, ate his candy before his little brother. Just as the older one felt the fizzies begin to explode in his mouth, the train went into a dark tunnel. About an hour later, the younger one pulled out his candy. The older brother felt obligated to give his sibling some advice. He said, "I'd be really careful with that candy...when I ate it, I went completely blind for a moment." Being in the dark can be scary business.

Friends of the blind man in our story must recognize that as they bring their friend to Jesus for healing. Not necessarily seeking attention, Jesus brings the man outside the village presumably to get away from the crowds. He puts saliva on the man's eyes, something we might cringe at now, laying his hands on him and asking, "Do you see anything?" The man responds, "I see people, they look like trees walking around." In this statement, we learn a few things. First, this man had once been able to see

sometime in his life because he knows what trees look like. Second, the healing works only partially. His vision isn't completely restored. It is the only time in scripture we are given a specific case where Jesus has to try again to complete a miracle, making it a two-stage miracle. So once more, Jesus puts his hands on the man's eyes and then his sight is restored. This healing story has always been a favorite of mine because it doesn't go as planned – it isn't neat and tidy, it's messy just as life is messy. The first touch of Jesus' hands doesn't do the trick – does that startle Jesus, does Jesus wonder if he is losing his touch? But we as the readers know Jesus' word alone can instantly heal blindness, as it happens later on in Mark. We aren't told how long Jesus stands there looking at this man before proceeding to the next stage. When will those walking, talking trees finally turn into people? What is the blind man thinking in this moment? Is he the reason the miracle didn't take the first time and, if so, what can he do differently?

These are the kinds of stories we find in the Gospel of Mark and the older I get, the more I appreciate them. In Mark's stories, none of the characters seem to know anything! Yes, God knows, the author seems to know, and Jesus knows to an extent the implications and consequences of events, but there is much secrecy, lots of mystery around his mission. But, the disciples never figure it out; neither do the religious and political leaders. The leaders only seem to know enough to be suspicious or downright dangerous. Some outsiders in the story, particularly the demon-possessed, recognize Jesus; but they are always quickly silenced. Jesus' family thinks he's crazy; his hometown is clueless; his closest associates see him perform miracles, but seem always surprised by what happens next. They puzzle over the meaning of his parables even as he tells them they have ears to hear, eyes to see. With all our awareness of

Jesus' life and experience with his stories, we can't believe the disciples are so dense, maybe we are even aghast that it takes two attempts to heal the blind man, but the reality is this story is for all of us in the 21st century who are still walking around in the dark. We've been introduced to the Messiah, possibly experienced a divine touch at one time in our lives, but like the blind man, we still aren't seeing clearly. As C.S. Song writes, "Our eyes are closed, not only when sleeping at night but when wide awake. Our eyes are shut, not only when praying but busily going about our work. Our eyes are sealed not only when meditating but when we argue with others. We just do not see... Jesus once said in Matthew 13:14, 'You will indeed listen, but never understand, and you will indeed look, but never perceive.' Why not? Why don't we perceive even when we are bright-eyed? Is it selfishness, self-indulgence, busy-ness, or restlessness? The disciples on the road to Emmaus encounter the Risen Christ, they look but they do not see. They looked at Jesus nailed on the cross but they didn't see the Risen Christ walking right beside them. They heard the voice but they didn't understand who was talking to them. Why? Is it because they were too distracted, too distressed, too exhausted, or too helpless?"

Best-selling author Brian McLaren asserts that it has much to do with what is called the "framing story" of our lives. Whenever we belong to a group, from a family to a church to a fan club to a political party to a nation – we are under the influence of that group's framing story which directs our instruction regarding where we come from, what's going on around us, where we are situated in the story's plotline, where we are going, how we should act, and what we are here for. Framing stories are contagious, shaping us into the people we are today. If our framing story tells us we humans are

godlike beings with godlike privileges, intelligent creatures outside a limited environment of time and space, without potentially fatal flaws, then we will have no reason to acknowledge or live within limits, whether moral or ecological. Similarly, if our framing story tells us that the purpose of life is for individuals or nations to accumulate an abundance of possessions and experience the maximum amount of pleasure during the maximum number of minutes of our short lives, then we will have little reason to manage our consumption. If our framing story tells us that we are in life-and-death competition with each other, that only the fittest will survive, then we have little reason to seek reconciliation, collaboration, and nonviolent resolutions to our conflicts. If it tells us that we are simply masses of atoms in a complex and ultimately meaningless fermentation and decay process, and there is no higher value to the human story, then we have little reason to seek transcendence and betterment. But if our framing story tells us that we are free and responsible creatures in a creation made by a good, wise, and loving God, and that our Creator wants us to pursue virtue, collaboration, peace, and mutual care for all living creatures, and that our lives can have profound meaning if we align ourselves with God's wisdom, character, and dreams for us...then our lives and society will take on a radically different direction, and our world can become a very different place. This story of vision over blindness, in contrast, will become contagious.

There is so much blindness going around, and in light of our global climate crises, along with our inability to address it effectively, we are being confronted with strong evidence that our dominant framing story has been failing. Our story has not been to respect environmental limits but instead to pursue as much resource use and waste production as possible, also known as economic growth. Rapid and extravagant

resource use is so profitable for some people that avoidance and denial of the consequences of such a framing story can be maintained for a very long time. But we are called to open our eyes, to see clearly our calling, not just as humans but as Christians, to protect our environment. As Pope Francis noted a few years back, protecting the environment is a part of our identity, not just an ideological option. We can't dismiss environmentalists as just a bunch of tree huggers because this is a Christian calling, which goes all the way back to Genesis. As the Pope stated, "A Christian who does not protect creation, who does not let it grow, (and I would say thrive), is a Christian who does not care about the work of God; the work that was born from the love of God for us. And this is the first response to that first creation: Protect creation, make it grow. We are the caretakers of creation, not its masters."

Jesus stood before the blind man whom he had lovingly touched and tried to heal, but still only saw in part, only perceived life in shadows and distortions. Jesus had to take a second stab at it, because blindness is multi-layered and it is scary business. The great, historical preacher Harry Emerson Fosdick said something that has never been more true: "The real danger in our situation lies in the fact that so many people see clearly what they are revolting from and so few see at all what they are revolting to." We are a society filled with layers of blindness and in our self-made tunnels, we turn a blind eye to the consequences of our choices, to the destination in which our revolt will lead us. Jesus lifts his hands once more to touch our eyes, to heal our vision, for it wasn't Christ who lost his touch, it was us all along. Let this be the moment our sight is restored, let this be the time our vision is healed, by the grace of God, Amen.