

Really Seeing

Matthew 20:17-34

Cradock Presbyterian Church

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There's a difference between "seeing" and "*really* seeing." Sometimes you see something so often, it blends into the background. You're so used to seeing it, you *see* it, your eyes focus on it, but you don't think much about it anymore. There comes a time when what's been in the background, when what's "always been there," becomes important, powerful. It's a shame when you don't recognize how important it is, because you just can't see.

Sometimes you don't see because you're too close. It's the old "can't see the forest for the trees" thing. No matter how many times you get told about something, you just can't see beyond what's right in front of you – trees, or whatever. Jesus had already begun telling his disciples that he was going to go to Jerusalem and be killed. This passage is the *third* time he'd told them. You know that THREE is a big number for those folks. You know, for example, that Peter was going to deny Jesus THREE times, which meant complete denial. Jesus telling them THREE times that he had to die *should have* made it definite. But the Twelve don't argue back; Matthew doesn't record any comments at all here, not like the first time he told them. So – had these predictions blended into the background? Had they simply stopped paying attention – stopped seeing? Jesus gives them much more detail in this telling of his fate. That makes it seem more like a prophecy; in fact, in each succeeding telling, he gives them more detail. This *should have* been clear; the Twelve *should have* seen clearly what this ministry, this life, was all about.

But sometimes you don't see because you're thinking about yourself. I know that in the next part of the story, James and John, the sons of Zebedee, don't actually ask Jesus for their places at his left and right hand; their mother does. They themselves are really the ones behind all this; note that the mother came to Jesus *with her two sons*. It's kind of creepy, actually; they get their mother to do their dirty work. I don't want to dwell on *that* dynamic, though – the bigger issue is what is now transpiring. These folks have just heard, for the THIRD time, that Jesus is going to go to Jerusalem and be put to death by the authorities. But they don't *really* see, they don't grasp it; they're too busy worrying about their own needs. They also don't see that Jesus is talking about the Kingdom of God, not an earthly kingdom. You see that they're thinking that way because the mother approaches Jesus, kneels before him, petitions him just like you would an earthly monarch. They can't see that Jesus is after something much, much more.

So Jesus tries to put it in the right light. He addresses their request: "Are you able to drink the cup that I must drink?" And like any blindly ambitious person, they say "Yes." The two brothers can't see that the cup Jesus is talking about is the cup that he'll try to get rid of in the Garden of Gethsemane: "Father, take this cup from me; nevertheless, not my will, but yours be done." The cup is the suffering and anguish and death that come to Jesus on the cross. It's amazing that these two brothers can say that they can drink that cup. They sure act differently on Good Friday! They just don't see. And it just might be that they can't see *because they don't yet believe*. Jesus' three-times warning about what he will do hasn't sunk home yet.

Did we mention that sometimes you don't see because you're thinking about yourself? The other disciples get wind of what happened with the two disciples and their mother approaching Jesus, and what they asked for. They react with their own self-centered sense of being cheated. That's why they were angry. Just like the two disciples who wanted positions, they don't see what the point to Jesus' ministry was. That must be the case because Jesus had something pretty potent to say about it. "Lording it over" the others, as Jesus puts it, is the way of the world. It's the way you act when you think about yourself first. It's the way you think if you think of earthly kingdoms, because that's what kings do, they "lord it over" their people. The word here in the original means "to bring under one's power; to subdue; to exert mastery over." Jesus is clear; he says: "It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must *be your servant*." That means not thinking about yourself first, your needs first. Worrying about positions at the left and right hand of a supposed throne is about as centered on self as it gets! And then Jesus rams home the point by pointing to his own death AGAIN! He concludes by saying, "just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." I suspect there was silence in the group after that!

But Matthew doesn't let well enough alone. Matthew remembers a story right after that, that makes the point about *really* seeing. Sometimes we *do* see, and it helps us; and then things happen that enable us to *really* see. As they went along, Jesus had his usual entourage following along with him and the Twelve. They made a lot of commotion, as any large group would. Along the side of the road were two blind men.

Blind people sat by the road, because that's where people would be passing in big numbers, and so it was a good place to set yourself up and ask for "alms," gifts the religious folk might give to the less fortunate. And to be blind meant to be totally UNfortunate! In those days before braille and voice-assisted software, to be blind meant to be unemployable. No work available to you; and therefore, no money, no way to make a living. We know nowadays that when you lose one of your senses, the others often get better to make up for it. These two blind men had excellent hearing. They heard the commotion, so they must have asked what was going on. They found out it was Jesus. And *listen* to what they say! First, they shouted, "Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!" The crowd didn't like it. Crowds can be a dangerous thing, you know, especially if you're blind and can't defend yourself. *Even in spite of the danger*, these two blind men kept calling out: "Have mercy on us, Lord, Son of David!" They did it over and over, as the original language suggests. That, my friends, is a statement of faith. They so believed in Jesus and who he was that they kept calling out.

Now of course, they wanted something for themselves, too. Obviously! They were asking for something huge, to receive their sight. But what did that mean? It meant they were trying to be made *whole* – exactly what Jesus wanted to do for everyone. Remember, salvation and healing and making whole were all related in their minds. Then there's this: They wanted to be free from totally relying on others, and free to do for others. They could only do that by receiving their sight.

How ironic! It's these *blind* men who see really clearly. These blind men see Jesus for who he is: the Messiah. *And they already believe.* "Lord" and "Son of David"

were terms for the Messiah who was to come. These blind men, in contrast to the Twelve, saw clearly who Jesus was – and believed. That’s why they called out to him. Of course Jesus would restore their sight. Somehow they knew that, they believed that, already. The contrast between their request and the request of the mother earlier in our passage couldn’t be more stark, and I’m sure Matthew intended to point out that contrast, because Jesus says, both times, to the mother and to these blind men, “What do you want me to do for you?” I think Jesus understood where these blind men’s hearts were. He must have known what would happen. He healed them, gave them their sight – and they followed him, became followers, as soon as they were healed. They saw clearly what they were supposed to do. Unlike the sons of Zebedee and their mother, they thought of others – because to become a follower of Jesus meant you were ministering to others, serving others – exactly as Jesus had just finished saying to his disciples.

Matthew ended this section with the blind men for a reason. He was trying to teach his first century readers about really seeing, and what that meant. He teaches us, too. I think sometimes, maybe a lot of the time, when we’re faced with problems in the church, we can’t *really see* because we’re too close to the problem. We can’t imagine how big and wonderful a forest we’re in, because we’re too worried about the trees in our immediate way. We can’t *really see* because we’re too much bound by our own thoughts, our own worries, our own fear that we’ll lose something that we want. It’s self-centeredness, sure, but not in a bad or evil way. We want to do what we think is the right thing – it’s just hard to *really see* what that is. And we sometimes can’t *really see*

because we lack faith. We can't believe what we're seeing; we deny what we're seeing; we turn away from what we're seeing because we don't think we can deal with it. If we won't look at what we're supposed to look at, then we're as good as blind.

So we take a lot of hope and a great deal of faith from this story. Even if we turn a blind eye, we can count on Jesus to restore our sight. Even if we can't, or *won't*, see that God is in our midst helping us, still God remains. Even if we stay blind to the way God is working out his salvation in our lives, you know what? We can count on God to restore our sight. And if, like those blind men, we have our eyes opened to *really see* what God is doing in our world, then we'll have to do just like those two blind men, and get up, and follow our Lord. May God bless us, as our eyes become open, and we give ourselves over to him.