

Focusing Our Imagination

“You can’t depend on your eyes when your imagination is out of focus.”

So says Mark Twain, the famous author, and agnostic.

It’s the same point that another Mark, the author of today’s gospel, drives home this morning.

Two weeks ago, we watched as the rich young man came running up to Jesus looking for the way into life.

He leaves with his head hanging down — because what he owns actually owns him — and he can’t imagine a life without his stuff.

Last week, two of the twelve approach Jesus, and respond to his question:

“What do you want me to do for you?” — with requests for power and glory, because they can’t imagine that service is the way to salvation.

Today, Jesus continues his journey to the cross, arriving in Jericho.

The last stop before confrontation, conflict, and crucifixion.

As someone else approaches him today.

Not rich and young but poor and blind.

He cries out — not for eternal life or power — but for mercy.

While his eyes can’t see, his imagination can!

As he throws away the only thing he owns.

The cloak that's his blanket at night.

His umbrella in the rain.

He abandons his one possession the moment he hears the one whom he knows to be the Messiah.

When Jesus asks him what he wants, it's not to be seen, but to see.

Not to be followed, but to follow.

And while Jesus can't give places of honor away, he can give sight to this already insightful blind man.

The whole thrust of Mark's gospel, it seems, is to nurture our imaginations.

To move us from sight to insight.

The disciples eyes work just fine.

What they lack, is insight.

Peter scolds Jesus for predicting a suffering messiah.

And when Jesus tries again to prepare them for what's coming in Jerusalem, why, that's the cue for James and John to ask for seats of power and prestige, as if the Kingdom of God is simply another bureaucracy.

Mark's gospel is full of these ironies, as he constantly contrasts Jesus' closest friends, these true insiders, with some of the most unlikely outsiders.

The hopelessly lost.

The rejected and unwanted.

Those who, amazingly, display the imagination, the insight, that allows them to see in Jesus, the face of God.

Even as his closest friends are half blind to it all.

And so Mark drags us within inches of the woman who's bleeding for twelve years.

She has no right to approach Jesus.

She has no right to touch him, since touching him will make him unclean.

But she pushes through the crowd anyway, grabbing his shirt, and instantly feels her ailment vanish.

Jesus responds not with reproach, but with the same life changing words he says today to Bartimaeus:

"Go, your faith has made you well."

Mark brings us nose to nose with the Syro-Phoenecian woman.

A gentile.

Who confronts Jesus on behalf of her possessed daughter.

She refuses to take even Jesus' "no" for an answer.

Instead, seeing who he truly is, she presses on until her need is met.

Mark shows us the desperate father who struggles to increase his own faith so that his son may be healed:

"I believe, help my unbelief!"

Mark sets us alongside Jairus, the temple big-shot, who resists the taunts of the crowd to give it up because his beloved little girl is already dead.

Because his insight provides the trust needed to keep standing there, as he hears the most precious words ever spoken in his lifetime:

"Talitha cum - little girl, I tell you, get up."

It's children and aliens and free lancing exorcists who show us what focused imagination, what insight, looks like.

All while the respectable folks stare at their shoes on the sidelines.

And each of these encounters tell us something crucial about faith.

These encounters tell us that "faith is the rude insistence that the calamity be attended to — now!

That faith plows through every barrier.

That faith leaps up, standing naked before Jesus – trusting that all will be well.

Only this faith can cure our blindness.” Jennings, *The Insurrection of the Crucified*, 175, paraphrased.

And I must say I have struggled with this contest between physical sight and insight – with my own lack of focused imagination – as day by day the encampment behind the church remains.

For the longest time, we fed, provided water and other services to these, our fellow human beings.

When their presence attracted others more interested in crime and violence into the area, and after reaching out quite deliberately to try to get folks into shelters, we stopped providing services.

Hoping that by stopping, folks would be encouraged to make a change.

To seek out shelter and more permanent housing.

But drug addiction, emotional pain and the sheer inertia that long time houselessness causes, are a far more powerful force.

And so here we are.

And the question I keep hearing, as we offer this situation up to God in prayer, is:

“What do you want me to do for you?”

And in response, I have only more questions.

What is the church if it doesn't reach out daily to the least, the lost and the left behind?

And yet, what of the accumulated wisdom learned through addiction treatment about codependence?

About enabling destructive behavior?

About failing to assign consequences to destructive behavior?

"What do you want me to do for you?"

I want to see!

And I know you do too.

I share these questions to invite your prayerful consideration of how to move forward.

In the face of a society in which a multi-billion dollar drug trade, some legal and some illegal, grinds those addicted to dust, while a select few grow rich on their misery, what ought to be the voice of the church in response to this daily travesty?

A travesty sitting right outside our gates?

Especially when so many of the afflicted, living on the streets, are the indigenous people of this land.

What do we late-comers, we settlers, say and do in response?

"What do you want me to do for you?" Herod asks Salome, and she demands the head of John the Baptist.

“What do you want me to do for you?” Pilate asks the crowds, and they reply with thunderous voices: “Crucify him!!”

“What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus asks Bartimaeus, and you, and me, today.

It’s a question that creates its own calamity.

Shall we jump in bed with James and John, whose stunted imaginations keep them locked in stunted hopes placed merely in safety and security?

Or shall we be like Bartimaeus, who abandons all that he has – and fearlessly follows the Lord of Life?

The choice is always accompanied with fear.

What happens when we toss away everything to follow this Jesus?

Well, one thing’s for sure.

There’s a cross at the end of the line.

Always.

And yet, without the cross, can there be a resurrection?

Perhaps this is why Mark urges us to focus, not so much with our eyes, but with our imagination.

As Jesus unleashes the paradox of losing our life to save it.

Making the last first.

Recognizing the greatest among us — as the one who serves.

Subverting the world we create.

Ushering in a new world.

A world that can be seen only by those with focused imaginations.

With the sight that becomes insight.

Jesus is not about preserving our stuff.

He's about transforming relationships.

Every relationship.

From the most intimate between the closest friends.

To neighbors and strangers.

To the vast structures that form the foundations of our society.

Jesus, as Dorothy Day once wrote, invites us to join with those who are working "to build a new society within the shell of the old." D. Day.

Can focused imagination show us the way?

Can we trade the "sight" of conventional wisdom, for the radical, yet amazing, insight of the gospel?

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