

## **Blind Bartimaeus/Blind Disciples**

Not too long before the events of today's reading, James and John, along with Peter, had accompanied Jesus to a mountain top.

There, they saw an astonishing vision of Jesus – this Jesus who had the same dusty feet and human needs that they did changed before their eyes.

His clothes went from dusty, sweaty travel clothes to dazzling white. Brighter than anything on earth could get them. They saw Moses and Elijah appear.

Then a cloud moved over them, and out of that cloud a voice boomed – “this is my son, the beloved. Listen to him!”

You can hardly blame them for the expectations that vision raised. They knew the prophecies of the coming Messiah. They believed Jesus was the one.

Jesus would be victorious over Israel's enemies and would be placed on the throne. Mind you, they're not thinking about any heavenly throne – they're thinking about a very earthly throne.

And they wanted a share in the power and glory Jesus would claim. They knew based on the transfiguration vision it would be awesome...and they wanted seats of importance in Jesus' reign.

But they had been blinded. They lived in a world that had particular ideas about power...about who had it and who didn't. Their world said that the kind of power that mattered was the power to get people to do your will...by force if need be.

Their world said that those in power should sit in the high places where people could bow in awe of them. Their world said that those in power should be served by their subjects.

The disciples had been blinded by an imagination shaped by the world's understanding of power. And honestly, I think they had been blinded by the vision of Jesus on that mountaintop.

Blazing white clothes, thundering voice from heaven, the appearance of two great heroes of their faith...that all fit.

This bit about the Son of Man being handed over to the high priests and the scribes? To be condemned and handed over to the Romans to be killed? That didn't fit at all.

And although Jesus said he would rise again in three days, there was just no place in their heads for that to land.

The disciples were more blind than Bartimaeus. He understood Jesus better than the disciples or the crowds.

See Bartimaeus was utterly powerless. He was blind and helpless. When you're that powerless, you don't expect a king – or any other powerful figure – to pay attention to you.

If this was a presidential motorcade, the secret service would likely have intervened.

The people around Bartimaeus told him to shut up – in essence, he wasn't worthy of asking Jesus for anything. But Bartimaeus knew who Jesus was and what Jesus was about better than all those others.

Power feels so close to James and John they can taste it. They want to reach out and grab it. They want positions of power in the coming glory days, and they think Jesus has the power to give them those positions.

Blind Bartimaeus is so far from any hope of power. He isn't even thinking about that. He just wants to see.

We who are Jesus' disciples are now the ones who should be able to see what Jesus is about. Are we less blind than James and John?

With each reading during Lent, we have two chief questions – how does this passage reveal the kingdom of God? How does this passage call us to repent?

This passage shows us that in the kingdom of God, service is the key, not the ability to have power over others. Jesus came to serve. Ultimately Jesus' service meant losing his life to change the lives of others.

And he tells his disciples...which now include us...that service is our call too.

The call to repent is the call to recognize where we are blinded by our own perceptions of power...and who we ignore when that happens.

We may think that since we're not really in power much of anywhere, this doesn't apply to us. But the problem remains that we live in a society that has made power into an idol. This does affect all of us. But it especially affects people like Bartimaeus.

Power is an inherently political thing. Politics is all about power – who has it, who uses it most effectively, who we think can win. Doesn't matter whether it's workplace politics, politics on a sports team, or politics in government.

Power can be used for good. But I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that most of the world's problems are because of the human tendency to idolize power for its own sake.

Racism is about power.

Sexual abuse and harassment in the work place and on college sports teams are more about power than sex.

Domestic abuse is about power.

Bullying on the playground is about power.

War is about power...and sometimes it seems like it's about little more than power for its own sake.

In fact, violence in general is often primarily about power. How much of the gun violence in our society is about someone who feels powerless finding a tool that gives them power – and then using it?

Politics is full of people who want power – and when those in government seek to govern through debate and compromise, they're seen as weak. And we abhor weakness.

I think some people are attracted to certain politicians simply because they seem the most powerful, even if the things they say they want to do will cause harm to the most powerless. I think part of the inability for our congressional representatives to get things done has a lot to do with some of them not wanting to seem weak.

And the worst thing about all of that is that certain groups in the Christian church have recreated Jesus in the image of the human lust for power. They have done the very same thing James and John did.

Most of us probably feel like we're not in a position to change any of that. But in this season of repentance, we can examine our own views of power.

Do we admire most the people who exude power? Do we turn a blind eye to the folks like Bartimaeus...people who have been utterly left in the dust by the worship of power?

This contrast between the desire of James and John for power and the healing of Bartimaeus are next to each other in the story for a reason. Jesus isn't just telling his disciples what his ministry is really about – he's showing them.

And he's showing us.

Our call as disciples is not to lust after power or make it an idol that influences our views and actions. Our call is with the Bartimaeuses of society.

Our call is to pay attention to what our idolization of power does to people at the margins – the people outside the rings of power.... the blind, the sick, the disabled, immigrants...brown and black people...poor people.

And it's not just about serving humans – our call is also those places where lust for power...and its cousin greed...have damaged the natural world.

This passage begins with the note that Jesus and his disciples are now on the road to Jerusalem. The next chapter is Jesus' entry into Jerusalem – the passage we typically read on Palm Sunday.

In Jerusalem, the disciples...and we...will see just how far Jesus is willing to take this serving business. There, Jesus will be put to death by those in power who see him as a threat. That's ultimately where human lust for power ends – with God on a cross.

We of course know that's not the end. The resurrection means victory over death...but it also means victory over the human idolization of power and all the harm it causes.

But in this season of Lent, we're not there yet. So, we watch Jesus. We watch him touch the untouchable. We watch him single out the most powerless in the crowds. We watch him love the most unlovable.

And we see him reach out to heal us, to take away our blindness. We follow the steps he walked to the cross, for us. We see his solidarity in suffering with the most powerless. And we can't help but rethink our own lives and the powers we worship that are not God.