

The Cast | People Engaged In the Story of Jesus Christ

“Half-Healed Blurry Vision”

Mark 8.18-34

March 1, 2015

And He was giving orders to them, saying, "Watch out! Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod." ¹⁶ They began to discuss with one another the fact that they had no bread. ¹⁷ And Jesus, aware of this, said to them, "Why do you discuss the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet see or understand? Do you have a hardened heart? ¹⁸ "HAVING EYES, DO YOU NOT SEE? AND HAVING EARS, DO YOU NOT HEAR? And do you not remember, ¹⁹ when I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces you picked up?" They said to Him, "Twelve." ²⁰ "When I broke the seven for the four thousand, how many large baskets full of broken pieces did you pick up?" And they said to Him, "Seven." ²¹ And He was saying to them, "Do you not yet understand?"

²² And they came to Bethsaida. And they brought a blind man to Jesus and implored Him to touch him. ²³ Taking the blind man by the hand, He brought him out of the village; and after spitting on his eyes and laying His hands on him, He asked him, "Do you see anything?" ²⁴ And he looked up and said, "I see men, for I see them like trees, walking around." ²⁵ Then again He laid His hands on his eyes; and he looked intently and was restored, and began to see everything clearly. ²⁶ And He sent him to his home, saying, "Do not even enter the village."

²⁷ Jesus went out, along with His disciples, to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way He questioned His disciples, saying to them, "Who do people say that I am?" ²⁸ They told Him, saying, "John the Baptist; and others say Elijah; but others, one of the prophets." ²⁹ And He continued by questioning them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered and said to Him, "You are the Christ." ³⁰ And He warned them to tell no one about Him. ³¹ And He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. ³² And He was stating the matter plainly. And Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him. ³³ But turning around and seeing His disciples, He rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind Me, Satan; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's." ³⁴ And He summoned the crowd with His disciples, and said to them, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me.

We're working our way through the Gospels as we normally DO at this season of the year. This time we're focusing on the other characters that share the stage with the Main Character. As in any drama, some supporting actors have major roles and some have only a "bit part" (Macbeth: "a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage") This IS the case with today's person...a blind man healed half-way and then again.

In himself, he's a minor player but he also embodies something happening in the whole drama. And Mark the writer sees it. This man and his experience with Jesus Christ directly parallels what's happening in the minds and hearts of the followers of Jesus Christ.

This odd healing stands right at the peak moment in Mark's account. IN FACT, the first three Gospels all revolve around this moment when the disciples are asked by Jesus Christ to add up the evidence and draw a big conclusion. After so many clues and signs and revelations...lots of puzzle pieces dropping into place, the Rabbi asks His students if they're able to make out the picture that's taking shape. "Who do people say that I am?...Who do YOU say that I am?"

As soon as the disciples put it together, immediately the teacher's strategy changes. Objective #1 is achieved and only now can the step #2 be taken.

This is the hinge on which the whole story swings. AND...it is AT THIS POINT that so many people sort of lose it... people settle for a kind of conclusion...a sort of decision about Jesus Christ...a type of conviction or settled opinion or belief in Jesus Christ or about Jesus Christ and ...it's good and true and may be even a vast improvement over where they WERE...but it STOPS. It's "mission accomplished" instead of a way unfolding that leads to life and relationship and growth and new discovery...just a kind of reverential correctness...an end in itself.

Believe is a verb and though it is (as we'll see) primarily passive (i.e. to rest receive) for many people it's a point in time and NOT an ongoing experience. So let's look at what it means to LIVE BY FAITH. Let's look at: #1 the conception of faith, #2 the birth of faith and #3 the flourishing of mature faith.

Jesus sees the WEEDS of UNBELIEF in the religious leaders and in Herod, people jaded and deeply cynical and CLOSED TO ANY POSSIBILITY that they themselves may be wrong. They would ask Jesus Christ for a sign...and another and another and they would never conclude anything...would never see (as we've said) the sign-if-i-cance of the signs and never change.

But also in the disciples themselves – they'd just seen Him multiply bread and feed thousands of people and they were already fretting about where they'd get their next meal – the Bread of Life was in the boat with them but their hearts weren't resting.

And sometimes Jesus Christ finds, the opposite, finds faith in the most unlikely of characters. Last week we saw it in that Gentile Centurion, who said, "NOT because I am worthy but because YOU have power." And what we've seen is that faith is less like a decision that one can make or must make, less like a resolution or a "new leaf" and more like a dawning. One way to think about unbelief is that it's like a disability from which a person cannot heal himself.

It's amazing how often healing is used as a metaphor for forgiveness in the Bible (e.g. Isa 53). And here, one reality often overlooked about faith is that we are BOTH responsible for our unbelief (hardened heart, v. 17) but ALSO powerless over it...we can't cure/heal ourselves ...Faith has to be conceived in us from without.

Looking at the disciples He says, "Having eyes do you not see? And having ears do you not hear and do you not remember?" He describes unbelief as an incurable disability, like dementia: "Do you not remember"; like deafness, like incurable blindness.

And then immediately, in the next scene, Jesus heals an incurable disability. In fact, the same disability to which He just compared the disciples' unbelief: blindness: He's highlighting the parallel between physical blindness and spiritual blindness – we're powerless over BOTH.

The crowd at Bethsaida brings a man helpless, unable to bring himself, blind - unable to find his way - a vivid picture of inability. His problem is real. It's not a cop-out, not a lie, not a lack of willpower. He can't see, like a paralyzed man can't walk. You'd never get angry with a person like this; he'd say, "I can't."

And in the same way we could scold or command or cajole or question the person who does not believe and the unbeliever would be correct to say, "I can't."

I realize that raises serious philosophical questions. This passage doesn't stop to answer them (they're addressed to some degree in other parts of the Bible). The focus here is simply on the fact that Jesus ends the man's blindness and in doing so He simultaneously ends the spiritual blindness and the unbelief of Peter and the disciples. And faith is conceived.

As powerless as the man was to end his blindness, so powerless we're they to end their unbelief. But Jesus of Nazareth shows that He can open eyes to see AND only He can open hearts to believe.

Now what do WE do with that? There's a mystery in it... we can't help our unbelief (in that sense it's like an incurable infirmity) and yet we are also responsible for it (in that sense it's like a decision or like a sin)? How should we respond to that mystery?

Well, let me suggest that on your own you can draw certain conclusions about Jesus Christ, like the crowds...you can decide certain things spiritually /intellectually/volitionally; in much the same way you could decide to start working out; or you could conclude that the earth is a sphere or you could decide to start saving money; or choose where to live or commit to stop being late for work or school. But being a Christian isn't exactly like any of these things.

It's actually more like being healed of an incurable disease over which you yourself are powerless. And I don't mean to suggest that there AREN'T decisions in the Christian life. Just that, deeper than the decision (John 1.12-13), deeper than will...all of us are blind, are bound...unable...until Jesus liberates to believe. It's not to say that believing is illogical-irrational – there were evidences and signs but something MORE than just logic is at work in the conception of faith.

They couldn't put it together (v.21) - these unbelieving disciples, but Jesus kept battering their hearts with His trustworthiness and when Peter finally saw it/said it, Matthew's version, includes Jesus Christ's words to Peter, "Blessed are you Simon, son of Jonah, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you but My Father who is in Heaven." Peter didn't "do the math" on his own. This wasn't simply a decision. It was a liberation. Faith was conceived.

One practical consequence of this is gratitude. If you believe, it's NOT because you're smarter or faster or more disciplined; it's because you've been liberated and given eyes to see God's grace in Jesus Christ. So be grateful and rejoice. Another upshot is real sympathy toward those who don't believe and a complete absence of any self-righteousness of sense or your own superiority. We can't fix our unbelief – it requires supernatural intervention.

For those here who DON'T believe or don't YET believe... are you maybe unwittingly... beginning to believe? Maybe faith has been conceived in you... and you're beginning to be aware of it because this Person, Jesus Christ is starting to attract your attention...you feel drawn. That's how it starts.

All right, first the conception and birth of infantile faith. Something real and vital and supernatural has taken place in the disciples. God liberated them and they have believed. But still, it was an infantile babyish kind of faith.

A huge conclusion is reached: "Thou art the Christ!" Turning point of the whole book - God opened their hearts to believe. But the immaturity of this faith is immediately exposed. They do believe (more than just knowing); they believe Jesus is the Christ, but they don't know what that word "Christ" means!

In the same way this helpless blind man now sees...He sees but doesn't really SEE. So THEY see that Jesus is the Christ but they don't see what a Christ is! It's a naïve and infantile faith.

The half-healed blurry vision man is a picture of the disciples. It's the only time this happens and evidently the writer Mark is showing us, "This is how it is for the disciples...and MAYBE also for YOU, O reader!"

Jesus gives the man opportunity to express an honest kind of dissatisfaction, which was pretty amazing. If Jesus Christ did work for you and asked, "How's that?... Do you approve?" Would you say, "Well, I know you are the Creator of the universe and all but...the picture quality is ...uh..."

Frankly...I might just "quit while I'm ahead." But this man - used to being helpless - he is somehow bold enough to say, "Please sir, I want some more."

And Jesus gets mad and says, "More?!!" NO! It's just the opposite. He brings the desperation to the surface and then Jesus is attracted to it, moves toward it!

And isn't Jesus saying to those disciples, "This is how you guys are...in a minute you'll believe (say "Thou art the Christ!") but your sight will be so cloudy (like seeing men walking like trees) but if you come to me and if you have that holy audacity to say, "Please sir! I want some more!" I will move toward you and I will give you clarity and will grow up your faith."

I do wonder if while He was healing this man He was looking at the disciples with a look that said, "See! When he asked, I made HIM see clearly. I did it for him. I'll do it for you!"

Maybe, they were so self-assured that THEY had figured it all OUT...and they KNEW exactly what a Christ was and THEY knew what the good life WAS and what spirituality WAS... and NONE of them was inclined to say, "Lord, I'm not sure I understand!"

Peter speaks up: "I may not know everything about what a Christ IS but I know this: YOU ARE NOT GOING TO JERUSALEM to be rejected and killed!"

And Jesus calls him the devil! Pretty sure that's NOT the way to mature in your faith!

And Jesus is saying, "You see but YOU don't SEE! And learn from the half-healed blind man...learn to say, 'I'm not there yet!' Because lesson #2 is that I have come NOT to clean up the government in Jerusalem or Rome or Washington DC...I have not come to make life NICE for you... I've come to satisfy the justice of God for YOU...and for everyone who believes until the end of time."

"I've come to do more than you could imagine... to live IN OBEDIENCE to My Father's Law (like no one ever lived) and to die as if I were the ultimate Law Breaker and to DO THAT FOR YOU."

"When you see it happened you'll be appalled... when you hear that I was stabbed and poked and beaten and ridiculed and showered in spit...you'll be ashamed...UNLESS...that is...if you get this NEXT LESSON and the only way you'll get it...is to ask."

Are you ready to say to Jesus Christ, "Lord, I see but I don't see? My faith is weak like a baby...I'm naïve and silly...my view of your kingdom is hopelessly tangled up in my understanding of the American Dream (just like those disciples view was tangled up in THEIR own cultural trappings of the good life.)

Are you willing to see how your own hypersensitivity to criticism, for instance, may just be a sign that you're not trusting the One who TOOK all your criticism and buried it in a tomb? Are you willing to say, "Lord, I see – but I don't see"?

Are you able to say, "the way I fret over finances and the great struggle I have with generosity shows that IN this area I have a VERY LITTLE Christ – I see but I don't see!"

If you say to this One you call the Christ, if you say to Him, “Lord, help me – I want some more!” Do you think He’ll yell at you?

And if He shows you what He’s really all about and it leads you to make changes in your life – do you think those changes will mess up YOUR life?

Then you really DON’T see... I mean you may SEE... but you don’t SEE.

Good news is...all you have to do...is tell Him...now and again...and again and again and again... “Please Lord, I see, but I don’t see...Please Lord, I want some MORE”...and He is delighted to clarify your vision and give and give and give.

The Communion

This idea about our being responsible for our decisions and our hard-hearted unbelief – that we’re culpable for the sin of unbelief AND that we’re powerless to stop it – we can’t cure our own blindness... that mystery is the kind of thing that can...mystify you. It can cause you to get discouraged and even to say, “What’s the use?!”

But the whole point of today’s sermon is NOT to wander into a philosophical maze or labyrinth... the point is to walk with Jesus Christ...outside the village and there to simply say, “Lord, I want some MORE...I have a holy dissatisfaction...still haven’t found what I’m lookin’ for...I see but I don’t see”

This is how it is to be a disciple of Jesus – we don’t have to know why God gives faith to some people and not to others...we simply have to know that Jesus Christ opens eyes...He gives faith to those who come and ask. So, don’t be afraid to ask for more – this is not Oliver Twist’s master; it’s the Lord of the Everlasting Banquet who turned a swimming pool of water into WINE at the wedding of Cana.

The Apostle Paul prayed for the early Christians, *“I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory... that you may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God.”* (Eph 1.18, 3.18-19)

Even the best Christians are often unbelieving believers... “Lord, I believe, help my unbelief... I see but in this area of my life, I don’t see the beauty and splendor of your grace.”

This is our prayer as we come to this Table. Make it all more clear to me here, Lord. Make grace visible, tangible, edible. Feed me and let Jesus Christ and what He did in His life, death and resurrection FEED me now. Pray that way now.