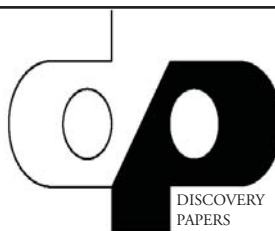


THE SECOND TOUCH

SERIES: THE WAY OF THE LORD: FOLLOWING JESUS IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK



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Mark 8:22-33
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As a newspaper reporter and editor for eleven years, I wrote and edited thousands of stories, the preponderance of which I couldn't call to mind today. Some bits of some stories have stayed with me, though, because of the way they affected me at the time. Some twenty-five years ago, a reporter for the newspaper I worked for wrote a story about an eight-year-old boy named Matthew who had lost his eyes to cancer when he was two years old. Prostheses, not actual eyes, filled his eye sockets. I edited the story and designed the layout for it. The lead photo and some of the boy's words reappear in my mind from time to time. In the photo, Matthew is clasping his hands and looking up plaintively, almost as if he were trying to see. The words I remember: "I have this queer feeling that I would like to see."

Unlike Matthew, most of us have eyes and can see with them. No matter how well we see, however, most of us also want to see in a different way. We want to see the truth. We want to see reality. We want to see past the surface to the heart of things. Perhaps, then, the words of a blind boy resonate with you today, and you have this queer feeling that you would like to see. If so, Jesus, as he is depicted in Mark 8:22-33, might be able to help you.

In the prologue to the Gospel of Mark, a sort of overture to the drama, Mark wrote that John the Baptist came to prepare "the way of the Lord" (Mark 1:2-3). In Act 1, with the region of Galilee as the backdrop, Jesus preached that the kingdom of God was at hand, acted in ways that authenticated his announcement, and called twelve disciples to join him in his mission. With Mark 8:22, we step into Act 2 of Mark's three-act drama, "the way" section, which depicts Jesus' journey from Galilee in the north to Jerusalem in the south and concludes at the end of Mark 10. On the road to Jerusalem, Jesus teaches his disciples about the way of the Lord, which features the way of the cross. The disciples, however, suffer from spiritual blindness and don't understand him. Not coincidentally, Mark brackets Act 2 with stories of blind men.

The middle section of Mark's gospel relates to our lives in many ways, not least to what we might call the middle sections in our spiritual journeys. Many of us, like the disciples, begin following Jesus with a flurry of enthusiasm. Then at some point we begin to get inklings that following him isn't all we thought it would be. Like the disciples, we have our own ideas about what discipleship means. Like the disciples, we're blind to the way of the Lord. Can Jesus open the eyes of his disciples? Can he open our eyes, if we too suffer from spiritual blindness? Let's see.

Mark 8:22-33:

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

²⁷Jesus 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?" ²⁸They told Him, saying, "John the Baptist; and others say Elijah; but others, one of the prophets." ²⁹And He continued by questioning them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered and said to Him, "You are the Christ." ³⁰And He warned them to tell no one about Him. ³¹And 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. ³²And He was stating the matter plainly. And Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him. ³³But 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."³¹

A mirror for the disciples

Jesus and his disciples leave the region of Decapolis, which is southeast of the Sea of Galilee, and make their way north to the village of Bethsaida, on the northeastern tip of the sea. Here, Jesus encounters a blind man—significant in light of Jesus' recent questions of his disciples, "Do you not yet see or understand?" and, "Having eyes, do you not see?" (Mark 7:17-18). The disciples have not yet been able to "see" who Jesus is or the nature of his mission. So, here comes a man whose physical condition mirrors the disciples' spiritual condition.

Jesus' actions—taking the man's hand, spitting in his eyes, laying his hands on him, and speaking to him—could be understood by a man who can feel and

hear but can't see. Although the disciples have been spiritually blind, Jesus is relating to them in ways they can understand. Echoing the questions he put to his disciples, Jesus asks the blind man, "Do you see anything?" The man answers that he can see, but his description of what he sees—men who look like trees—indicates that his sight is imperfect. So, Jesus touches him again, after which the man sees "everything clearly."

The man need not go to the village and beg any longer, so Jesus instructs him to go to his home. Although Jesus doesn't command the man to be silent, his instructions serve to limit publicity so that he might keep from being inundated at a time when he wants to focus on healing his disciples of spiritual blindness.

In Decapolis, Jesus healed a deaf man (8:31-37); in Bethsaida, he heals a blind man. The two healings awaken the words of the prophet Isaiah, who said, "Then the eyes of the blind will be opened / And the ears of the deaf will be unstopped" (Isaiah 35:5). Isaiah was anticipating Israel's liberation from Babylonian captivity, but he spoke in a way that evoked something more expansive than the return from exile. He spoke, also in Isaiah 35, of a road—the "Highway of Holiness"—back to Zion, the mountain on which the city of Jerusalem was perched. Jesus, along with his followers, will shortly set out for Zion and travel on the "road" to Jerusalem (Mark 10:32). Jesus is orchestrating the greater return from exile, bringing Israel not back to Jerusalem but back to God, effecting a deeper kind of healing than restoration of sight and hearing, not only for Israel but also for the world. The Lord said through Isaiah, "I will lead the blind by a way they do not know, / In paths they do not know I will guide them" (Isaiah 42:16). Jesus led the deaf man away from a crowd and healed him. He led the blind man outside the village and healed him. He will lead his disciples to Jerusalem and do something even greater for them.

Feeling for sight

No one starts out understanding either who Jesus is or the nature of his mission. In this respect, we all start out blind. Along comes a story, right out of the scriptures, of a man whose few minutes with Jesus mirror the stories of our lives.

Some people remain in the dark and can't see Jesus for who he is. Many in this world who know Jesus, however, implore him, through their prayers and labors, to open the eyes of those who can't see him. Jesus then begins to relate to such folks in ways they can understand, almost as if he were taking them by the hand, spitting in their eyes, laying his hands on them, and speaking to them. However he does it, he touches them in a way that that enables them to see, however dimly.

At some point, and in so many ways, Jesus asks those of us he has touched, "Do you see anything?" If we're honest, we admit that our sight is imperfect, that men look like walking trees, so to speak. We need Jesus to

touch us again. In truth, we need him to touch us a thousand more times, right up to the time when we see him face to face in the new creation.² So, he touches us again and again, in just the right ways in just the right times, so that who he is and what he's up to comes into sharper focus.

So, do you want to see? As the story of the blind man of Bethsaida awakened hope in Israel, does it awaken hope in you—for freedom from self-imposed captivity; for a sort of return from exile, which in reality is a return to God; for a deeper kind of healing than restoration of sight? Do you have this queer feeling that you would like to see?

When I was about thirty years old, some fourteen years after I began following Jesus, I went for a walk one day and came to the top of a hill where I had the impression that a wall separated me from Jesus. I wanted to be closer to him, but something that I did not understand stood between us. I perceived his presence, but my perception was hindered by the wall. I wanted desperately to break through the wall, but without even trying to do so, I knew that I couldn't do it. I had the impression, sure as the impression I had of the wall, that for me to get closer to Jesus, he would have to break through from the other side. So, from my side, I begged him to break through. I wanted to see—to see him, to touch him, to draw near to him.

Who is he? What's he up to? Can you see?

A suffering Christ

From Bethsaida, Jesus and his disciples head to the predominantly Gentile villages of Caesarea Philippi, the northernmost point of his travels. On the way, he poses a question to his disciples concerning his identity. They tell him, consistent with Mark's reportage in Mark 6:6-14, that the populace conceives of him as a prophet. When Jesus asks them about their opinion, however, Peter answers, "You are the Christ." The title Christ, or Messiah, had come to be associated with a Jewish leader anticipated by the Hebrew Scriptures. (The Greek word *kristos*, translated "Christ" in English, is equivalent to the Hebrew word *masiah*, translated "Messiah" in English.)

In the first sentence of his narrative, Mark identified Jesus as "Christ" and as "the Son of God," a messianic title. Now, for the first time in the narrative, one of his disciples identifies Jesus as the Christ, and he does so in the shadow of a city that bears the names of Caesar Tiberius, a Roman emperor, and Herod Philip, a partially Jewish ruler who derived his authority from Rome.

Those who were identified as messianic figures in the first century usually didn't last long under the watchful eyes of both Rome, the superpower of the

day, and rulers such as Herod Philip, who collaborated with it. The Christ, like his predecessor, David, was expected to fight Israel's battles. If you said you were the Christ, you set yourself up as a rival to Caesar, who obliged your claim, if you managed to gain much of a following, by nailing you to one of his crosses.

It's no wonder, then, that Jesus warned his disciples not to tell anyone about him. First, he wasn't ready to die. Second, he needed time to instruct his disciples about the nature of his mission, which cut across popular messianic expectations. Peter, on the way to the villages of Caesarea Philippi, sees for the first time that Jesus is the Christ. But like the man whom Jesus brought outside the village of Bethsaida, his sight is only partial. He understands that Jesus is the Christ, but he doesn't understand the nature of his mission. Jesus, as the Christ, would fight Israel's battles, all right, just not the battles Jewish nationalists wanted him to fight. Like the blind man of Bethsaida, Peter, along with the rest of the disciples, needs a second touch.

Therefore, Jesus begins teaching his disciples about his mission. He identifies himself not as the Christ *per se*, or even as the Son of God, but as the Son of Man, a less loaded title that allowed him to invest it with his meaning. If you were a Jewish nationalist in the first century, you wanted your Christ to overthrow corrupt Jewish leaders and throw off the fetters of Rome once and for all. Jesus says it isn't going to be anything like that. Instead, the elders, chief priests, and scribes, who comprised the Sanhedrin, a sort of Jewish supreme council, would reject the Son of Man. Instead of overthrowing the powers, he would be killed by the powers. The bad guys, he says, are going to win. Then, if any of his disciples happen to be paying attention after his shocking prediction, he adds that the Son of Man will rise again after three days. What? Rise again? After only three days? Yes, many Jews expected God to raise his people from the dead, but all at once at the end of the age (John 11:23-24). No one expected a one-off resurrection for an individual in the middle of time. Talk of this kind of resurrection would have made no sense to the disciples.

Jesus, Mark notes, was speaking plainly. Jesus restored the blind man so that he could "see everything clearly." Will Peter, who has seen things clearly enough to identify Jesus as the Christ, see everything clearly so that he understands the mission of the Christ? Well, no, at least not for a while. Jesus led the blind man outside the village and healed him. Peter, though, leads Jesus away from the disciples to set him straight. Peter, instead of letting Jesus heal him completely, attempts to correct Jesus' vision.

What if in the fall of 2008, the junior senator from Illinois told his inner circle: "Most people believe that the failing economy poses the greatest threat to the United States since the Great Depression. The entire country expects its president to conquer the economy. But I'll

tell you what's going to happen. If elected president, I'm going to suffer many things, and the economy will defeat me." If he said something like that, someone from his inner circle, perhaps all of them, would have rebuked him. If that's what he had said, and word of it leaked out, I venture to guess that our president today would not be Barack Obama. We elected him for many reasons, but for one reason more than any other: to defeat the enemy, the economy.

Jesus' prediction of his passion would have shocked Peter in the way that the words of Barack Obama would have shocked his inner circle in the imagined scenario. A non-suffering, non-dying, victorious Christ—that's what Peter wanted. In Peter's rebuke, Jesus hears the voice of Satan, who tempted him in the wilderness (Mark 1:13). The temptation of Satan, with his all-but-irresistible siren song, is to be anything but a suffering, dying Christ. Jesus turns around to see his disciples. He will not be what they want him to be. Peter's rebuke—and Satan's temptation—requires a strong response, both for Jesus' sake and for Peter's. Jesus says, "Get behind me, Satan." Jesus is not identifying Peter as Satan; he's recognizing the influence of Satan, who persuades men and women to prefer humanity's interests to God's interests. Peter, who had identified Jesus as the Christ, isn't following the Christ; he's trying to lead the Christ. Peter needs to get behind Jesus, where he belongs, and follow him.

Feeling his hands

The question Jesus put to Peter reverberates through the centuries. Jesus is so widely known today that one can hardly avoid the question anywhere in the world: "But who do you say that I am?" Many today would answer in a manner similar to the people of Jesus' day: he was a prophet; he was a good teacher; he was a wise man with good advice. Even the Koran, the book of Islam, deems him a prophet. Jesus remains a popular figure, but a prophet, a good teacher, or a wise man poses little threat to the status quo, particularly if he's buried in the pages of history.

Peter says Jesus is the Christ. What does that mean today? It means, in light of the entire biblical witness, that Jesus is the resurrected Lord of the world. If he is Lord, then all rulers and powers, both seen and unseen, are subject to him. It means, also, that you are subject to him. So, what say ye? Who is Jesus?

If you answer that he is Lord of the world, you probably, like Peter, have some expectations for him. Perhaps, like the Jewish nationalists of the first century, you may want him to fight your battles for you, to trounce your enemies, seen and unseen, real and imagined, so that you, your people, and your causes may advance in this world. If so, your sight is only partial, and you need a second touch. Some who profess Jesus to be the Christ would do well to heed Jesus' warning to his disciples and not tell anyone about him until they have a better understanding of the nature of his mission.

Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, begins to instruct those of us who confess him as Lord concerning his mission, which calls for his rejection. To this day, he'll let everyone do with him what they will. He still lets the bad guys win. To most observers, it looks like we're following a loser, a leader who either doesn't know how to use power or doesn't have any power to use. Many of us, because of our disappointments, have had occasion to wonder whether we've signed up for the right cause. We wish for Jesus to prove himself, both to us and to a world that doesn't believe in him. Many of us have also done what Peter did: instead of letting Jesus touch us again, we've pulled him aside to set him straight. In the face of our protestations, Jesus has not wavered. In fact, his failure to endorse our aspirations feels like a rebuke, almost as if he is telling us, "Get behind Me, Satan; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's."

How to make sense of it all? By listening to all of what Jesus said instead of screening out the parts that don't make sense or don't seem to mean much to us here and now. He speaks to us not only of his death but also of his resurrection. His resurrection guarantees the resurrection of his followers, the defeat of evil, and the renewal of all things (1 Corinthians 15:20-28). He will fight all the right battles at the right times and in the right way: in the way of the Lord, the way of the cross, the way of self-giving love, which opens him up to rejection. God raised Jesus from the dead, vindicating both Jesus and his way. He will also raise the people of Jesus from the dead. Until then, and in advance of that day, Jesus is defeating evil left and right and throughout the world in ways barely perceptible, if perceptible at all, through his people who are learning to walk in his way. Jesus loves us too much to cooperate with our interests when they don't line up with the interests of God. Instead, he pries us loose from attachment to such interests—rebuking us if he has to—and immerses us in the way of the Lord. He touches us, that we may understand who he is, and then he touches us again, that we may understand what he's up to.

Some eight years after I bumped into the wall at the top of the hill, the memory of my walk came to me and I realized that I no longer felt separated from Jesus. He had broken through the wall, not suddenly or all at once, but slowly, imperceptibly, so that I didn't notice that he had broken through until sometime after he had done so. He touched me once, so that I came to know him as a teen-ager, and then, sometime in my thirties, he touched me again.

If you don't know Jesus, follow him as he takes you by the hand and leads you outside the village, apart from the place where you've learned to survive in your blindness. Let him touch you wherever he wants to, that you may understand that he is the Christ, the Lord of the world, your Lord.

If you know Jesus and he's disappointed you because he hasn't endorsed your aspirations, go ahead, pitch a fit.

Pull him aside and try to set him straight. After you're through, though, let him touch you again—right in the eyes. Feel his hands on your eyes, look intently, and get behind him, where you belong. Then let him lead you by a way you do not know, and let him guide you in paths you do not know. Follow Jesus in the way of the Lord so that the kingdom of God might come fully and finally. When it does, Jesus will lay his hands on your eyes once more, and you, like the formerly blind man of Bethsaida, will see everything clearly.

Who is he? He's the Christ, the Lord. What's he up to? He's defeating evil by walking in the way of the Lord: the way of the cross, the way of self-giving love, the way of rejection. What does it mean for you? It means that you must follow him in the way of the Lord. Can you see?

The Highway of Holiness

I no longer feel that a wall stands between Jesus and me, but for as close as I feel to him, and as much as I know from my study of the scriptures, there are times when I feel not just partially blind but totally blind, as if I know nothing. In *Tender Mercies*, one of my favorite movies, Mac Sledge, played by Robert Duvall, struggles with the disparity between the blessings in his life and the tragedy in his daughter's life. Finally, he opines, "I don't know nothin' of a blessed thing."³ Yes, I've felt that way. Many of us struggle to understand how our disappointments are caught up in the purposes of God. Yet, even when I feel that I know nothin' of a blessed thing, I know that I know some things. I know I believe that Jesus is Lord, and I know I must walk in the way of the Lord, even if I can't see where I'm going. I don't always see well, but I want to see. Maybe wanting to see is at least as important as seeing. And maybe trusting without seeing is more important still. Maybe, then, trusting apart from the understanding you crave qualifies as the greatest sight of all. "Blessed are those who did not see, and yet believed" (John 20:29).

Do you have this queer feeling that you would like to see? Jesus wants to help. Feel his hands on your eyes—once, twice, a thousand times. Who is he? What's he up to? What does he want of you? Keep asking him to show you. And walk—grope and stumble, if you have to—in the way of the Lord, the way of the cross, the way of self-giving love, the way of rejection, along the Highway of Holiness, all the way to the gates of the new Jerusalem.

NOTES

¹ Literary structure:

A They came to Bethsaida (22)

B Question outside village: “Do you see anything?”

C Answer: Partial sight (24)

D Second touch: He laid his hands on his eyes (25)

E He sent him to his home (26)

A' Jesus and disciples went out to villages of Caesarea Philippi (27a)

B' Question on way to villages: “Who do people/you say that I am?” (27b-29a)

C' Answer: Partially correct (29b-30)

D' Second touch: He began to teach them (31-32)

E' He said, “Get behind Me, Satan” (33)

² The Apostle Paul, anticipating the new creation, says in 1 Corinthians 13:12, “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known.” The Apostle John says that in the new creation, the servants of Jesus “will see His face” (Revelation 22:4).

³ *Tender Mercies* (Universal Pictures, 1983).