

I Want to See

Mark 10:46-52; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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As you know, this Sunday's service has been devoted to the theme: **Encountering, Embracing, and Embodying Christ in Life, in Community, in the World**. Perhaps you've noticed the banner with these words in the entrance above our conference room.

This is the vision statement that has emerged out of a nearly two-year process initiated by Mennonite Church Alberta called Vision 20/20. This is what we want to be about as Mennonite churches in our province in the year 2020 and beyond.

It's a good statement, a good vision that came out of much prayer and conversation and reflection among sisters and brothers in Mennonite churches across our province.

It's a statement that I can imagine every serious Christian, whatever their denomination, would (and should) gladly affirm. I like that about this statement. It's a vision of Christian faith that points toward some traditionally Anabaptist emphases on community and discipleship, but not in any kind of a tribalistic way that tries to emphasize our "brand" in distinction to others.

But I have a confession to make. I have somewhat mixed views about vision statements.

On the one hand, there's a sense in which the church's vision doesn't really change. The church's vision has been set for us. It's not like we have to keep reinventing it every few years.

Micah 6:8: What does the Lord require of you but to do justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

Matthew 22:37-39: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind... 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

Matthew 28: 19-20: [G]o and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

1 John 4:7-8: Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.

These are some of the high points in our Scriptures where the essence of the faith seems to be packed into a few sentences. There are many things that can confuse and unsettle us in the bible, but we come across passages like these and think, “Oh, right, *that’s* what we’re supposed to be about as a church.”

The church had its marching orders for a very long time. Indeed, in a world that is endlessly enthralled by the new, the shiny, the exciting, I find myself often longing for the simplicity and clarity of these ancient words and well-worn paths of wisdom.

And yet, on the other hand, the question of *how* we live this wisdom and this call in our time and place is vitally important. Sometimes new ways of reframing old truths is important and necessary.

This is particularly true amidst rapid cultural changes, as we increasingly move from a context where Christianity was assumed to one where the church’s influence is waning, where it is indeed often viewed with a mixture of suspicion, confusion, and apathy.

So, this brings us to the three E’s that come at the end of MCA’s 2020 Revisioning process. **Encountering, Embracing, and Embodying** Christ.

(Incidentally, if you want to learn more about the history of this process and ways to get involved more directly, the MCA website has a ton of great resources put together by our new communications coordinator Ruth Bergen Braun who we are very familiar with here. She is also the creative inspiration behind the image on the screen this morning.)

Encounter: the church is (or should be) a place where we meet Jesus, again and again.

Embrace: the church is (or should be) a place where we accept his teachings and his finished work on our behalf, where we agree that Jesus tells the truth about God, about us, and about the world

Embody: the church is (or should be) the place where we are challenged and strengthened to represent Jesus and his kingdom in the world

Our gospel text this morning is the story of an encounter with Jesus.

Jesus is passing through Jericho on his way to Jerusalem. There's a crowd present. People are imagining big things in the days ahead. They've seen Jesus' healing and miracles, listened to his teaching which is unlike anyone else.

And now the show is on its way to the capital. Perhaps there will be a revolution. Perhaps this will be the end of the hated Romans. Maybe there will be fireworks with the compromised religious elites. No matter what goes down, it's bound to be exciting.

There's a blind man on the side of the road. His name is Bartimaeus, which is interesting.

It's interesting first of all that he's even named (many of the recipients of Jesus' miracles in the NT go unnamed). But it's also interesting because of the nature of the name.

"Bar" is Aramaic for "son." ("Bar- abbas = son of the Father). But Timaeus is a Greek name.

So, the name Bartimaeus is a kind of Greek/Aramaic hybrid of sorts. And in Greek, the name Timaeus calls to mind the name of a character in one of the philosopher Plato's most famous dialogues. In this dialogue and elsewhere, Plato famously contrasts "seeing" the mere physical world while being "blind" to Eternal Truths and talks about sight as the foundation of knowledge.

We don't know for sure if this is why Mark provides the blind man's name or not, but it sure is interesting to think about, isn't it?

At any rate, Bartimaeus makes a bit of a racket. *Son of David, have mercy on me!* The crowd rebukes him. There are, remember, important places to go and impressive things to see. Jesus has somewhere to be.

But Bartimaeus just yells louder. And Jesus stops. He stops and asks him a question.

What do you want me to do for you?

We hear this story and we think, “Well, seriously, Jesus! The guy’s blind. What do you think he wants you to do for him?”

But Jesus honours this man’s dignity by asking him and letting him respond for himself—this man who would have received little dignity anywhere else in the world.

Rabbi, I want to see. It is a statement as simple as it is profound. *I want to see. I want to be healed, set free from this affliction. I don’t want to be begging on the side of the road anymore. I want to belong. I want what is normal for so many others.*

This man has no pretense whatsoever. He knows his need very well. He knows that he can do nothing for himself and that Jesus is his only hope. He simply throws himself at the mercy of Jesus.

And he is healed.

It’s interesting to contrast this story with the one that immediately precedes it in Mark’s gospel. If we rewind a mere ten verses, we see Jesus asking the same question he asks Bartimaeus to his disciples James and John.

James and John are more presumptuous and demanding than Bartimaeus. *We want you to do for us whatever we ask* (Mark 10:35). I can imagine Jesus has a bit of a bemused grin on his face at this point. But he humours them.

What do you want me to do for you? he asks. The same question he asks Bartimaeus in Jericho.

James and John famously respond by asking for positions of honour and privilege and influence and prestige at Jesus’ right and left when he comes in glory (they have no inkling at this point that Jesus’ “coronation” will take place on a Roman cross or that the “seats of honour” will be occupied by two thieves on his left and right).

James and John’s request is followed by a lecture from Jesus. “This isn’t how things work in the kingdom of God,” Jesus says. “We don’t lord power and influence over others, we don’t selfishly demand status and recognition. Greatness comes from humility and service. The last are first and the first are last. You don’t get it yet.”

What do you want me to do for you?

James and John ask for power and get a lecture about the logic of the kingdom of God. Bartimaeus asks for mercy and Jesus says, “Your faith has healed you.”

Bartimaeus receives physical healing but the surrounding crowd are, in a sense, healed of their spiritual blindness and taught how to see with kingdom eyes. They are trained to see as God sees—to see value not in the trappings of power that they (and we) so naturally crave, but in those who are easily ignored, those who honestly and simply acknowledge their need for mercy.

Bartimaeus had a simple request of Jesus. He wanted to see.

There is a sense in which our vision statement—Encountering, Embracing, and Embodying Christ—is just a different way of saying that we want to see.

We want to see as Jesus sees. We want to value what Jesus values. We want to people to see Jesus when they see us. We want to be one of the means through which Jesus expresses his love in and for the world.

For Bartimaeus, his sight was granted by Jesus instantly. One minute he couldn’t see, the next, miraculously, he could.

But seeing accurately in this spiritual sense of the word is not like flicking a light switch on or off. It is a way of life, a daily deciding, a lifelong pursuit of looking at ourselves, the world, and God through “Jesus-tinged lenses.”

This brings us to our second text from Paul’s letter to the church in Thessalonica. On a first glance, it can sound like a moral checklist of sorts.

- Rejoice
- Pray continually
- Give thanks always
- Don’t quench or stifle the spirit’s work in the world
- Don’t treat with contempt those who stubbornly insist upon God’s justice and truth
- Hold fast to what is good

- Reject evil

Do all these things and God will be pleased with you. Right?

But what if we were to hear these words and the spiritual disciplines they point to not as some kind of religious final exam but as an invitation to see?

To look at the world through “Jesus-tinged” lenses? To move *away* from some of our natural inclinations toward getting God to do what we want (like James and John) and toward seeing *what* Jesus sees and *as* Jesus sees?

Does that change how we hear them?

The church (including our Mennonite church) faces all kinds of challenges in 2020. The pandemic, our lack of cultural prominence, suspicion of institutions, waning volunteerism... the list could go on.

And yet, Paul tells the early church and our church to be thankful in *all* circumstances. Can we actually do this? I think we can and we must.

I *am* thankful for the opportunity that this cultural moment provides for the church. We are no longer a “given.” This gives us the chance to ask ourselves important questions in new ways.

What do we actually believe? What is the role of the church in and for the world? What is necessary? What can we let go of?

Is our faith in a history? In “the way things have always been?” Is our faith little more than a social or political agenda that we tag God on to the end of?

Or is our faith, hope, and love anchored in the living God, encountered most clearly in Jesus Christ?

Paul’s words in Thessalonians are not about trying to put a brave face on, or always looking at the bright side of life, or stubbornly pretending things are better than they are.

For Paul, a life of gratitude, joy, and prayer that transcend the particulars of any human life is only possible because of what God, in Christ, has done for the salvation of the world.

Paul's life was hard. He experienced persecution, calamity, rejection, disaster, imprisonment, flogging... the list goes on and on.

And yet, he stubbornly believed that he could do all things—even giving thanks in the midst of hardship—through Christ who strengthened him for the task.

Gratitude and joy of this kind are decisions that transcend the particulars of human experience. And I think this is a uniquely Christian response to the world.

It's not a useful bit of self-help advice. It's not some practical pop-psychology. It is a response to the hope of the gospel of Jesus Christ, which promises that nothing can ever separate us from the love of Christ.

It is a life lived in response to God's promise that no matter what this or that moment looks like, we are part of the big, beautiful, liberating, and hopeful story of God reconciling all things to himself in Christ Jesus.

It is a life that trains us to see God, the world, the church, and ourselves truly.

Because we know that nothing good, true or beautiful is ultimately lost. We know that God holds our lives in his hands—that it is safe to trust God for what we cannot cling to.

We know that living with deep joy and gratitude, with spiritual discipline and intentionality, are how we come to see clearly, as God sees.

May our prayer—as a church here in Lethbridge, as a broader Mennonite Church Alberta community, and as a global family of faith, be a cry as simple as Bartimaeus's.

Rabbi, we want to see.

May God keep our simple need for mercy ever before us. And may we seek to be those who are always open to encountering Christ, embracing his way of living in the world, and embodying this hope to those around us.

Amen.

