A Lever and a Place to Stand: The Mechanics of Transformation
Matthew 20:39-34

That story we just heard from the Gospel of Matthew is an interesting illustration of how the New Testament got put together. This story—about two blind men who sit by the side of the road and make a ruckus until Jesus veers off-path and asks them what they want—appears in three of the four Gospels in the Bible.

Mark was the first of those accounts of Jesus that was written and circulated in the decades after Jesus’ death. Matthew, the Gospel we read from this morning, wasn’t published until perhaps a decade later. The same is true for the Gospel of Luke. Scholars believe that the writers named Matthew and Luke had Mark’s story in front of them when they were writing. But they also had other sources—stories about Jesus that were circulating in their circles, mostly by voice—storytelling.

In all three Gospels—Mark, Matthew and Luke—the setting for this story is the same—near the city of Jericho. But in Mark’s version there’s only one blind man. His name is Bartimaeus. So I imagine Matthew heard, or read, Mark’s story and said something like, ‘You know, I remember something like that happening too. Mark’s right; it happened right outside of Jericho. But the way I heard the story, I think there may have been two blind men there, not just one.’ And so each writer wrote the story the way he had heard it in the family or community he grew up in.

Are the inconsistencies in these stories a mistake, something that make the Bible less true? Should they make us doubt Christianity’s conviction that God lives and breathes in some way in the pages of this book? I don’t think so. The faithful people who put together the canon of the New Testament could have taken all the stories of Jesus that were circulating in all the different communities of Jesus-followers and distilled them down into one authoritative account, one historical record. They chose not to do that. They purposely put in the Bible four different accounts of Jesus and his ministry, by four different authors who remembered things slightly differently. They intentionally embedded those differences in the essential source for Christianity. Why? To tell a different truth. The truth that not only do people remember things differently; we see things differently.

This is a story about seeing. There are three characters, and each of them says something to us about sight, and blindness.

• There are two blind men (or one if you’re reading Mark). These men know they are blind, of course; they’re conscious that some physical condition keeps them from seeing. They sit by the side of the road, where no doubt they have sat for months, maybe years, trying to catch the attention of people who might give them money for food.

• There’s a crowd. They’re following Jesus, the story says, but here’s a hint: when you see the word ‘crowd’ in the Gospels, that’s code. The ‘crowd’ is almost always going the wrong way. It’s headed for a confrontation with Jesus. In this case it’s not a direct confrontation, but the
crowd stands in between Jesus and the people who need to be healed. In fact, this crowd scolds the blind men, tells them to stop making so much noise. I’m going to guess that the folks in the crowd weren’t cruel people. They were followers of Jesus! But they’d been passing those annoyingly loud blind guys sitting by the side of the road for so long, that they’d stopped even seeing them. To the crowd, those blind men had become just part of the unfocused grime of their city. They only wanted money. It never even occurred to the crowd that the blind men and the healer passing through town might make a connection.

• And then there’s Jesus, who somehow sees through the screen of the crowd, hears the beggars’ voices above the din. Jesus is a really smart guy, so he probably sized up the situation in an instant. He could have just walked over to the blind men and healed them immediately. He could see they were blind. But he stops, a little longer than he has to, and he asks them, “What do you want me to do for you?” He waits and he listens…until they speak their own need, for themselves. “We want to see” they say.

What do you want me to do for you?

We want to see.

There’s a Tanzanian folk tale called “How the Monkeys Saved the Fish”. It goes like this?

The rainy season that year had been strong, and the river had broken its banks. There were floods everywhere, and the animals were all running up into the hills. The monkeys climbed up into the treetops, and looked down at the surface of the water, where the fish were swimming and gracefully jumping out of the water.

One of the monkeys saw the fish and shouted to his companion: “Look down, my friend! Look at those poor creatures. Do you see how they struggle in the water?”

“Yes,” said the other monkey. “What a pity! Probably they were late in escaping to the hills, because they seem to have no legs. How can we save them?”

So the monkeys started catching the fish, with some difficulty! One by one, they brought the fish out of the water. They put them carefully on the dry land. Soon there was a pile of fish lying on the grass motionless. One of the monkeys said, “Do you see? They were tired, but now they are just sleeping and resting. If it weren’t for us, my friend, all these poor creatures without legs would have drowned.”

The other monkey said, “They were trying to escape from us because they didn’t understand our good intentions. But when they wake up they will be very grateful because we have brought them salvation.”

‘Do you see?’ those monkeys asked one another.

Yes, they saw something; but they didn’t see what the fish saw.
“What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus asked.

I wonder how often good, well-intentioned people go barreling into what feels like ‘good work’ without knowing—or asking about—what is really needed. I wonder how often I’ve done that.

When I was the pastor in Campbell, a large part of the congregation was a community of immigrants from West Africa—Sierra Leone and Liberia. Both countries went through brutal civil wars in the 1990’s, and many of the West Africans who came to the U.S. came as refugees. People in my church had experienced, either as children or young adults, awful things: family and friends tortured and killed in front of them, their homes and whole towns burned to the ground. One of the most devastating parts of that conflict was that children had been taken out of the villages and forced to be the soldiers. Teenagers killed and destroyed their own neighbors. I heard a few of those stories, but I knew there were many more that had not been told. I also knew that most of the white people in the church had not heard these stories.

We were working in that church to build bonds of community across some pretty substantial cultural differences. I believed—I still do—that telling our stories to one another, honoring our differences, might be our most important tool for building community.

I met an American woman who had spent some time in Sierra Leone as part of a project called Fambul Tok, which means “family talk”. This program went into villages and encouraged the Africans who had been on opposite sides of the civil war to tell their stories, to forgive each other, and to rebuild the relationships between neighbors that had gotten broken in the war.

We invited this woman to come to Campbell, and to show the documentary film that had been made about Fambul Tok. This will be a great chance, I thought, to invite our African members tell their stories, and for the non-African members of the congregation to hear and understand their experiences. We were so excited about this, we showed the film multiple times, so that everyone could see it. We showed it once. Quite a few of the white people in the congregation came, but only a handful of Africans—and some of them walked out in the middle. We showed it again. There were no Africans present that time. We invited everyone to lunch, for the telling of stories. Almost none of the Africans spoke. What happened?

The memories of the people who had lived through those wars were thick, still fresh. They didn’t want to watch that war again on film. And their stories were too hard and personal and layered to share in public, with people who knew nothing about what life in Sierra Leone was really like. People who couldn’t possibly see what they had seen. It turns out we should have built those relationships first, rather than ask people to uncover their painful stories as a tool for building the church. I should have asked first, “What can we do for you? How do you want your church to know you, to see you?”

As we grow up into competent adults, we learn to make inferences, generalizations, from what we see. We do this instantly: we size up a situation, draw our own conclusions. We do the same thing with people. But the truth is, only a tiny bit of what’s inside a person shows on the surface. A few things are visible: race, language, gender, actions, age (sort of). Below the
surface, invisible most of the time, are the things that really make us who we are: our values, our childhood experiences, religious beliefs, the culture we grew up in. If I assume that every Asian person I meet is good at math, I’m going to miss some great conversations about literature. If I think every brown-skinned immigrant I see is in the United States because life here is more comfortable, or if I assume that every homeless person’s story is the same, I’m likely to hand out help that is not at all what is needed.

“What do you want me to do for you?” That’s the question that humility prompts, before we dive into anything that feels like an act of mercy.

“What do you want me to do for you?” Even Jesus asked.

The truth is that in that story from Matthew that we read this morning—the one about the two blind men—I am every one of those characters.

I’d like to be like Jesus, who brings healing and hope wherever I go.

I’m pretty sure I’m the crowd that sees less than the whole picture, whose not-so-obvious blindness sometimes mistakes need, sees it as only an annoying distraction.

But I think I want to be most like the blind man by the side of the road, who knows he doesn’t already have everything he needs. Who says simply, “I want to see.”