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Ethical Blindness

By Rob Grow

Text: **Mark 8:22-38**

Blindness and deafness are used in the Gospels in a metaphorical way, to depict misunderstanding or a lack of insight. This is also the case for the scriptures for today. We see blindness used as a metaphor for a kind of lack of social/ethical understanding, in the story of Jesus healing the blind man in Bethsaida.

In this story, Jesus is at Bethsaida - which was the site of other miraculous healing stories in the Gospels - and some people brought a blind man to Jesus and asked him to touch him. Jesus took him by the hand and lead him out of the village. Jesus puts saliva on the man's eyes and lays his hands on the man, and Jesus asks him if he can see anything. The man responds that he can see people, but they look like trees walking around. (Presumably, this man had been able to see before, because he can both recognize people and he knows what a tree looks like.) So, Jesus has to try again to heal the blind man. The healing comes in two stages, and once the man sees everything clearly, Jesus tells this man not to even go to the village. This story sets us up to get an understanding of what is happening in the next story.

In the next story, Jesus is journeying with his disciples on the way to Caesarea Philippi, which was both the source of the Jordan river (by an underground spring that flowed into a marshland) and a long-time center of pagan worship. As Jesus walks, he asks his disciples who people say that he is. He is told that some people say that he is John the Baptist, Elijah or one of the prophets of old returned, all of whom were figures who symbolized God's ending the inhumane status quo and redeeming the world. When Jesus asks who people say that he is, Peter replies that he is the Messiah, but Jesus orders them to keep it a secret. This may seem like a very strange response to us on the part of Jesus, but I think we understand why soon enough.

Jesus tells his disciples what has to happen to him. That he has to undergo suffering, rejection by the religious authorities, be killed and then resurrected. Peter takes Jesus aside to rebuke him, but Jesus rebukes Peter in front of everyone and calls him Satan, because Peter is thinking about human things instead of divine things.

Jesus then speaks to the crowd with his disciples, and says to them that those who want to follow him need to take up their cross and follow him. That those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for his sake, and for the sake of the gospel will save it. That it will profit them nothing to gain the world and give up their life, and also asks what they can get in return for their life. That those who are ashamed of Jesus and his words are those whom the Son of Man will be ashamed of at the final judgement.

What does all of this mean for us? Peter shows a kind of ethical blindness that is foreshadowed by the healing of the blind man in Bethsaida. The man at Bethsaida had to have his blindness cured in two stages. The same is true for Peter.

Why is it significant that this happens to Peter? While I do believe that there was a historical Simon Peter - I even think that he might have been mentioned by some ancient historians, along with James the brother of Jesus, who is considered the first Bishop of Jerusalem - Peter functions in the stories of the New Testament as a literary character who symbolizes the church. Peter is a stand in for all of us.

Peter gets his doctrine right. He is able to recognize Jesus as the Messiah, but he is unable to get the ethics of following Jesus right. Peter seems to assume that Jesus is going to be the kind of a triumphant Messiah that everyone expects, one that is going to kick butt and take names. Peter expects a triumphant Son of David, who will lead a divine army against the Roman Empire and put the Jewish people on top. Peter wants God to do all of the work. Peter gets the *who* right, but the *how* wrong.

Peter does act like a lot of Christians. We human beings have made a mess of the world. We are like little kids who have made a mess in the kitchen, and we expect Mommy to clean it up for us, only the kitchen is the world and Mommy is God. We want Mommy to do all of the work, but she told us not to make a mess. She bought all of the cleaning supplies and implements, and taught us how to clean. She has even offered to help if we will pitch in. Why shouldn't we help? This is the ethical eschatology that I think I have talked about before. We have dirtied our own home. God wants us to put in a little effort to help clean it up and make it the way God wants it to be, for all of our sakes. God wants what is best for us: a world without violence, poverty, prejudice or environmental destruction. The problem is that we have been our own worst enemy. Cleaning up the mess that we have made, in solidarity with God, will not delay God's redemption of the world, it is our participation in it.

Jesus is proposing that we do the work of the Rule of God on this Earth, to help make it the kind of world that God wants for us. It is not done by God doing everything for us! No, it is done by our following Christ's example. This is scary to us. But not only is it the only way out, it may not be as scary as we think, because we may not have that much to lose.

What do I mean by that? I will repeat what a mentor of mine once said, "The mortality rate is 100%." I need to point out that while all of us are going to die from something, not all of us will get to die *for* something. We cannot determine whether or not we will die, but can determine whether we will take risks for those things that matter the most, and the risks may not be nearly as big as we fear.

I will use myself as an example: as I think you know, I have taken up the cause of gun control because in a 5-year span of my career as a pastor and chaplain, I have the experience of ministering to 7 families whose children were killed with guns. These families included those who were rich, poor, black, white, rural, urban and sub-urban. Therefore, I have been leading a campaign to have the gun shows removed from the Summit County Fairgrounds. This campaign has been going on for about the last 8 years or so. This campaign has involved protests outside of the county fair and the gun shows. We used to attract armed counter demonstrators, who used to harass us. They don't anymore. We outlasted them. Fortunately, I am a lot tougher than I look. Yes, there has always been a risk that I could get shot at one of my protests. However, I live in the United States of America, where there are 40,000 gun deaths per year, and we have the most lax and irresponsible gun laws of any developed country. I could get shot driving my car, going to the gym, going to the grocery store, sitting in my own home, walking in a park, or working for hospice. At least if I get shot at one of my protests, I will be getting shot on my own terms! The same can be said for other causes as well.

Think of the Black Lives Matter Cause. An African American runs the risk of police harassment and brutality, just by virtue of being alive in this country. It makes no sense for that person not to participate in a Black Lives Matter protest. People deserve decent treatment and people need to be at risk on their own terms, because they are at risk anyway. Furthermore, we have seen in response to the Black Lives Matter cause and other progressive causes, that police brutality is not and will not be confined to the Black Community. We in the white community need to repent of looking the other way, in the face of racist police brutality. It is not being confined to communities of color any more. Chickens are coming home to roost. This demonstrates how wrong we were to so callously ignore the plight of our brothers and sisters.

Look at what we are doing to the environment. The effects of global warming are all over the news, in extreme weather patterns that are making normal life impossible for innocent people, in much of this country and the world. We can be at risk at the hands of the authorities or the weather. The choice is ours.

In January in Washington, DC, there was a riot at the nation's capital building, that can only be described as fascist. Armed extremists stormed the capital in an attempted coup de ta. Groups like those that stormed the Capitol Building are all over this country. They are not only a threat to a certain demographic, color or creed, they are a threat to all who will not join them in their madness. I am reminded of the poem by the German pastor, Martin Niemoller:

*"First, they came for the Jews and I did not speak out because I was not a Jew.
Then they came for the Communists and I did not speak out because I was not a Communist,
Then they came for the trade unionists
And I did not speak out because I was not a trade unionist.
Then they came for me and there was no one left to speak out for me."*

I do recognize that it can be scary to take a stand for the best of causes. But we may be at less of a risk by getting out there and doing the work of God to make the world a better place, than by sitting on the side lines and doing nothing, because there may not be a place to hide.

So, take a risk. Take up the cross. You are at risk already. So, you might as well be at risk on your own terms. The basic principle is true for any number of causes, including LGBTQIA+ equality, women's rights and world peace. No matter what your cause is, get up and join the struggle because it may be less risky than you think.

God wants what is best for us. God is with us in this struggle. It is time to take up our cross. Amen