My daughter, Kali, and I used to love to visit the aquarium in Chicago. The parsonage was just 2 blocks, easy walking distance, from the Metra trains that carried hundreds of commuters from their homes in the suburbs to their offices in the city every hour every day. She’d bring along her current favorite stuffed animal so she could show it the fish, and we’d join the briefcase carrying crowds on their way to work. The trains have what we called the balcony level: a single row of seats along the windows on both sides of the train. On one side you get a second story window seat; on the other side, you can look down and watch the passengers on the main level below and also across to the balcony seats on the opposite side.

We had just settled into our seats when we heard a noisy bunch of small children being herded into the seats below us. There had to be 2 dozen of them and now I understood why this train car had been empty; there was a string with a sign around several of the rows of seats. The young woman who’d been sitting there all alone had obviously boarded early and saved the seats for them. The kids had been sorted by t-shirt color and when the rainbow of little bodies had finally arranged itself into the proper color alignment, the teacher started them singing some songs to settle them down. As the train picked up speed, its humming engine seemed to become part of their morning vespers and Kali and I found ourselves singing along too.

A grandmotherly woman stood up and moved into the aisle, making her way to the front of the seated sections of wiggling colors. She turned around and made her fists into binoculars and immediately all the children did the same. “What do you see with your looking eyes, what do you see with your eyes?” she asked them. Hands went up and answers followed one after the
other: a red umbrella, a green train seat, lots of trees out the window, and one little boy yelled out, “You teacher! You!” and all the children laughed.

Bartimaeus may have been blind, but when Jesus walked by Bartimaeus recognized him in ways that the disciples still were failing to understand. Like the boy on the train, he yelled out to Jesus from his vision which came from somewhere other than his eyes: “I see you teacher, I see you! Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” He yells from his seat on the roadside. People tell him to be quiet, but he shouts again, “Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me!” The crowd shushes him; the disciples ignore him and try to usher Jesus on by. But, Bartimaeus will not be hushed. Again he cries and Jesus hears him.

It is interesting that Jesus does not go over to him but tells him to come. Could Jesus not see that the man had some limitations that would make it hard for him to come? But, sure enough, instead of hesitantly and slowly making his way through the crowd, this blind beggar throws off probably the only piece of clothing he owns and runs to Jesus. Perhaps Bartimaeus is already refusing to allow his disability disable him? Then Jesus asks him the same question he asked the demanding Zebedee brothers, John and James last week: “What can I do for you?” Instead of asking for elite treatment and special seats in the kingdom of God like James and John did, Bartimaeus says simply, “I want to see again.”

Pardon the pun, but, I think that if we look carefully, we will see that the story of the healing of blind Bartimaeus is about more than meets the eye. The crowd, the disciples, everyone seems to assume that Jesus had more important work to do than to pay attention to a blind beggar. In our society too, we rank people according to worth. Who is worth more, we are constantly assessing, those who have good looks, or who at least look similar to us, those who have money, decent jobs; if they lack these things, most often, their esteem is lessened our eyes.
We want to know: where do you live, what family do you belong to, what heritage and ethnicity has shaped you? The answers to these questions will determine what privileges you will be eligible for, what benefit of the doubt, what slack you will receive, how many second chances you will get, and how much sympathy you will generate if and when you do fall. Shoplift, get caught with cocaine, or drive drunk when you are a white wealthy suburbanite and you will have a very different outcome than if you are a person of color in the city.

Throughout biblical times, people believed that physical problems were punishments from God for sin; in addition, beggars were considered unclean. Bartimaeus was doubly doomed. The name, Bartimaeus, also had a double meaning. The ancient listeners of this story would have also recognized that the name “Bartimaeus” was not used by the writer of this gospel because there was a literal man named Bartimaeus; instead, they would have immediately understood that the name was chosen to make a point, to reinforce the point of the story. To understand this, we need to remember that this story would have been told verbally not read.

The name “Bartimaeus” is actually two words, “Bar” which means son of and “timai” which in Aramaic means defilement, fear, unclean. The listeners would have also realized that in Greek the word is Tamaios’ and it means “honor”! Bartimaeus would then mean “son of honor”. They would have nodded at the writer’s creativity; the name Bartimaeus itself would have communicated the meaning of the story. *He is simultaneously a person of defilement and of honor.* Isn’t this the story of all humankind, the question that all of us are called to answer.

Who are we? Who do we see others as? Will be treat one another and ourselves as the crowd and even the disciples treated this blind beggar, as unclean, or will we follow Christ’s lead and treat even those who society judges as unclean, as sinners, treat even our own flaws and failings as if they and we are still people of honor?
This story provides another example of how we cannot simply lift a bible verse out of the bible and assume we know what it means. We have to remember that these stories are not history or documentary; they are carefully written often secretly coded messages. The stories told by and about Jesus would have been understood by the peasant listeners of that day, but their point would have been missed by the Imperial forces that crucified not just Jesus but thousands of common folks as well. Like the slaves in the cotton fields singing about crossing over Jordan; the message was about escape and freedom but the slave masters would have just heard a bible song.

The gospels and epistles all take events in the life of Jesus and then pull forward stories, references, symbols and names from Jesus’ Jewish scriptures weaving them into his current situation. Much of what is in the red letters of your bibles is actually Jesus quoting the Torah. Throughout all the gospels and the writings of Paul, Jesus is surrounded by echoes of Moses, Elijah, and Isaiah. If we want to understand Jesus and our Christian bible stories, it is essential that we understand the Hebrew bible stories which Jesus quoted all the time. Jesus and those who wrote about Jesus used those stories as the context for understanding all Jesus said and did.

The story in Mark begins with the phrase: “Then they came to Jericho”. This would have been a signal to the Jewish listeners to recall what they knew about Jericho from their sacred stories. Do you remember what happened in Jericho? (sing) “Joshua fought the battle of Jericho, Jericho, Jerichoooo, Joshua fought the battle of Jericho, and the walls came a tumbling down…” And sure enough, this time too, Jesus fought a battle in Jericho and walls came tumbling down. This battle was not a military battle but a spiritual one, a moral one. The barrier between a blind beggar and those who would keep him literally pushed to the side and shushed, shattered. The outcast was brought in and the “in crowd” received yet another lesson from Jesus about what the kingdom of God was like and who the power of God is for.
In our day too, powerful important people are not expected to lower themselves to interact with the poor and powerless. At the last church my husband and I served, every Wednesday night the church became a shelter for the homeless. Each week, they would be fed dinner in the church’s kitchen, with food made by families in the congregation and then brought in and heated up. They would sleep on foam pads in fellowship hall, be served breakfast the next morning, and then given a sack lunch to take with them. The churches in the area shared this ministry so that there would be shelter every night of the week. I would sometimes do clean up on Thursday mornings and that provided me with a moment that I will never forget.

There was a homeless man who came each week who had severe diabetes and weighed easily 350 pounds. It was hard for him to put his shoes on and to be blunt, because of the sores on his feet, there was an unpleasant odor. Each week we sadly watched him struggle to put on his socks and his shoes and someone actually donated a pair of sneakers with Velcro instead of laces so he wouldn’t have to bend over and tie them. But, it was still a struggle each week for him to put on his socks and those new Velcro shoes.

One morning, my husband happened to walk into the room, stepping away from his usual assignment of cleaning the church kitchen. I was washing down the vinyl mattresses while people were gathering up their stuff to leave. Jack, without hesitation, walked over to this man, knelt down, and began to put on his socks for him; then he put on his shoes for him, fastened the Velcro and told him he’d see him next week. And he did this every week afterwards, for the next 3 years, until the homeless man didn’t show up one night and we found out that he had died.

“Jesus, Son of David, Have mercy on me!” yells the blind beggar. “Be quiet” shouts the crowd back at him. Who are the blind beggars of today and who are the crowds?
“I don’t have health insurance” cry millions of Americans; “Be quiet; healthcare is not a human right” shout voices backed by insurance executives and stock holders, resorting to outrageous lies and distorted information, drowning out the cries of those in need.

“Where will my children go when I am at work?” cry the single mothers in all economic brackets. “We cannot hear you” say the legislators who would rather condemn them as inadequate mothers instead of supporting them by creating affordable and safe child care options.

“I hear voices that terrify me and they are more real to me than my family; I fear everything and everyone when I am off my meds, and when I am on them there are terrible side effects so when I am feeling better, I go off them, just a bit, then just a bit more, until I can no longer distinguish between the voices in my head and those of my family and doctors. When my family finally convinces me to come home, we are told the wait for an appointment to get back on my medications is 6 months.” “Be quiet, we cannot hear you—crazy people live on the street and we refuse to believe that could be one of us, or our child, our parent who are living in hell daily. Cut the funding of mental health centers, of homeless programs, of supervised housing. We are embarrassed by the vulnerability of those whose brains misfire; but we are actually intrigued and impressed by the greed of CEO’s who collect their million dollar bonuses.”

The story of Bartimaeus teaches us two things: no matter what the culture says about someone’s worth, Jesus finds them worthy. And in Jesus’ presence, the blindness of the beggar was healed and the blindness of the disciples and crowd following Jesus was exposed. When we can think critically about what we have been conditioned to be blind to and what we have been
socialized to see as acceptable; we too might be healed and join Bartimaeus finally able to see the path that Jesus is walking and follow him. Amen.

Benediction:
What will you see through the eyes of Christ, what will you see through Christ’s eyes?
What will you hear with the ears of Christ; what will you hear with Christ’s ears?
Who will you reach with the arms of Christ, who will you reach with Christ’s arms?
Who will you love, with the love of God, who will you love with God’s love?
What will you do by the grace of God, what will you do by God’s grace?