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Trees Walking Around: Mark 8.22–26

RANDALL D. CHESNUTT

The story in our lesson text is unusual for several reasons. It is the only miracle of Jesus that takes place in stages rather than immediately. And there is the matter of Jesus' spitting and putting saliva on the man's eyes; spitting was considered defiling in the Jewish culture of the time and, as far as I know, disgusting in every culture (except baseball!).

Whatever we make of these unusual features, we can say for sure that the story serves to introduce a long section in Mark 8–10 in which Jesus interacts with his disciples about their own distorted vision. This long section is in fact framed by two stories of the healing of the blind, the other being the story of Bartimaeus in Mark 10.46–52. As the only two stories in Mark about the healing of the blind, they are no doubt positioned where they are to provide an interpretive frame for the intervening material and to suggest that what this material is really about is the disciples' "eye disease"—their blurred perception of Jesus himself and what it meant to follow him. The man whose sight was restored in stages is a living illustration of the spiritual condition of the disciples. To him people looked like trees walking around, and the disciples' vision was no less distorted. They, too, needed corrective vision.

As Jesus touched the man's eyes a second time, so he offered eye-opening instruction to the disciples in the rest of chapter 8 through chapter 10. A three-fold pattern occurs three times in these chapters: (1) Jesus anticipated his own impending suffering and death; (2) the disciples displayed gross misunderstanding; and (3) Jesus followed with pointed teaching to clarify his own mission and what it meant to follow him.

In the first of these three, Peter had correctly confessed Jesus as the Christ (Mark 8.29), but in his reaction to Jesus' first passion prediction, he also showed that he had imposed his own ideals on Jesus rather than confessing Jesus on his own terms. Jesus' reaction was stark: "Get behind me, Satan! You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men" (Mark 8.33). Moving from the nature of his own ministry to the essence of following him, Jesus then said: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it" (Mark 8.34–35).

In round two, after a second prediction of his impending death, Jesus overheard the disciples arguing about who among them was the greatest. His response again was pointed: "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all" (Mark 9.35).

Finally, in round three, after a third passion prediction, James and John, supposing that some of the glory they had just seen in the transfiguration might reflect onto them if they played it right, requested positions of status in the kingdom, making the other ten jealous that they had not thought of it first. To this Jesus responded:

"You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10.42–45).

EYE DISEASE AND “I” DISEASE

How could the disciples have been so blind? How could they have been with Jesus so long, hearing him talk of the kingdom of God day-in and day-out, observing his consistent lifestyle of serving rather than being served, seeing him value God’s will above his own, and still think first and foremost of their own interests, argue about who was the greatest, jockey for position and notoriety in the kingdom, and even cast Jesus in their own image?

Perhaps it was simply because they weren’t very bright. In addition to Jesus’ critiques of their lack of perception that we have already read, see his barrage of questions in Mark 8.17–18, 21, which immediately precedes our lesson text: “Do you still not see or understand? Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear? And don’t you remember? . . . Do you still not understand?” These men definitely were not the sharpest knives in the drawer!

But a more fundamental (and disturbing) explanation of why they didn’t “get it” is that they were too much like we tend to be: self-centered, self-seeking, self-interested, self-absorbed, self-gratifying, self-promoting. Their eye disease was “I” disease—an affliction that is still with us.

I am of the baby boomer generation, in which my success is judged by how much power and influence I can get, how much wealth I can accumulate, how much critical acclaim I can command by my personal achievements, how much I can win. It’s all about *me*—my success, my accomplishments, my comfort . . . *me*. If the analysts are right, subsequent generations (Generations X and Y and others since) are more civic-minded and service-oriented, but in some other ways still have the self right at the center. Taking Mr. Rogers too seriously, some of us have come to think of ourselves as so special that the world revolves around us. Other people must adapt to my needs and expectations, whether in the family or the workplace or the church. It’s all about me.

But this isn’t just a generational thing. Remember Narcissus, the mythical Greek character who saw his own image reflected in a pool and fell in love with it so much that he perished there, unable to pull away and see the beauty in anything or anyone else? From that story we get our word “narcissist,” but the phenomenon is older than the Greeks. The original sin in the Garden of Eden was that Adam and Eve resisted the limits placed on them and sought to be their own god by taking control of their own destiny. The Sabbath command, among other laws, was designed to hold in check this exalted sense of the self. If I work all the time I can develop the grand illusion that everything depends on me. But if I am forbidden to work one day a week and yet, lo and behold, the sun still rises and the world still turns, I must admit that I am not quite so central in the bigger scheme of things; I’m not the be-all and end-all.

NARCISSUS GOES TO CHURCH

Even in matters of faith, “I” disease is pandemic. Recently I heard the song “Shopping List” by the contemporary artist Babbie Mason. Here are the lyrics

Lord I need to talk to you;
there’s so much on my heart.
So many burdens make it hard,
and I don’t know where to start.
I thank you for my family,
for your mercy and your love.
Now on to more important things,
I’ll give my magic lamp a rub.

(Chorus)

Give me this, I want that,
bless me Lord, I pray.

Grant me what I think I need
to make another day.
Make me wealthy, keep me healthy,
fill in what I missed
on my never ending shopping list
. . . never ending shopping list.

Lord you've been so good to me,
how could I ask for more?
But since you said to ask I will,
'cause what else is prayer for?
The cattle on a thousand hills,
they all belong to you.
I don't need any cows right now,
but something else will do.

(Bridge)

I've made my list and checked it twice;
if I get it all it would sure be nice.
I want a nice wide smile on a perfect face,
and perfect hair that's gonna stay in place.
I want a smaller nose and a single chin,
and a figure like a perfect ten.
And kids that never yell or scream,
and hips that fit in designer jeans.
And a brand new house and a heated pool;
I could use them Lord, as a witnessing tool.
And a color TV and a VCR,
and Jesus plates on a brand new car.

The song is obviously dated (Who would want a VCR? Are they still made? And what does "color TV" mean? Is there any other kind?). It is also satirical (I hope!), but what it satirizes is a very popular brand of piety—one that is explicitly religious, one that is filled with God-talk and prayer-talk and worship-talk, but when distilled to its essence is a religion that is all about me.

There is a whole industry out there in a Christian guise that promises people wealth and power if their spiritual lives are up to speed. Popular books, speakers and seminars guarantee you riches and notoriety if you pray the right prayers and follow the right devotional disciplines. This popular but misguided brand of piety is problematic for many reasons, but one is that it makes *me* the center and *God* the servant. God does not *rule* in me; he *serves* me. God does not *transform* me; he *benefits* me. God is not my *Lord*; he is the *magic lamp* that I rub to get stuff. If other people are blessed through my good fortune, this is a wonderful fringe benefit, but fundamentally it's all about me. I bow down before the altar of self.

Those in the church are not immune to "I" disease. Ministers are especially vulnerable to the seductive allure of the center stage. Preachers get a lot of stroking, even a cult following in some cases. Some large churches have grown up around a single dynamic personality or charismatic leader to such a degree that when that person is no longer around, the church struggles even to survive. Some ministers have confessed, after the fact, that they liked it that way, even planned it that way. They thrived on the attention, enjoyed being indispensable, and coveted the power trip. An obscure character in 3 John 9 had such an exaggerated

sense of his self-importance. We know nothing about him except his name, Diotrephes, and John's characterization of him as one who "loves to be first" (in other translations, "loves to have the preeminence," "wants to be head of everything," "likes to put himself first"), but that brief description speaks volumes. In the imagery of our lesson text, Diotrephes may not have been blind, but his vision was at least blurry and skewed. People looked like trees walking around. He had hardly denied himself in the way that Jesus calls his followers to do. And where there is envy and selfish ambition, there is disorder and every evil practice (James 3.16).

Me-centeredness creeps into our religious discourse in countless other ways. I have heard it from some who, upon moving to a new town, shop for a church exactly as they would select a cell-phone provider or a fitness gym, that is, on the basis of what goods and services it offers. The question is, "How can I get the most bang for my buck?"—not "How can I best serve?" but "What goods and services do I get for my convenience and enjoyment?"—as if it's all about me.

I have heard it in lecture and seminar programs when popular speakers describe how things are done back in "my church." That language could be innocent enough; it is not necessarily self-centered to speak of "my family" or "my school" or "my team." But I fear that in holding up as a model what *I* have done in *my* church, I betray what is really important to me.

I hear it sometimes in the contemporary discussion of "the worship experience." Worship has (and should have) a profound impact on the worshiper, and therefore it is appropriate to speak of the worship experience. But if my focus of attention is not on *worship* (which is *God*-centered and *God*-directed) but on *the worship experience* (how it affects *me*, how it makes *me* feel, what it does for *me*), then I am too much at the center. My vision of discipleship is distorted. People look like trees walking around.

"GOD, I THANK YOU THAT I AM NOT LIKE OTHER PEOPLE"

But is it fair to compare ourselves to the bumbling, blundering disciples of Jesus in Mark? After all, we are here worshiping God at this very hour. Yes, but in Mark 9 three disciples worshiped too; and what worship it was on that mount of transfiguration! They had an amazing glimpse of Christ in his glory. But being awestruck in the presence of the divine is not the same thing as discipleship; thus the heavenly voice tells them to listen to Jesus. They had *worshiped*, but they had not *listened*—as they evidenced immediately after coming down from the mountain by their competition with each other, their lack of faith and their exclusion of others acting in Jesus' name. To return to the metaphor of our primary text, their vision was impaired. The most fervent worship, as important as it is, is no guarantee that one "sees" clearly.

But we have confessed Christ and wear the name of Christ. Yes, but as we have seen, Peter also confessed Jesus as the Christ and yet was told that his outlook was satanic, that he was not on God's side, and that those who wanted to follow Jesus must instead deny themselves and take up their crosses and follow him (Mark 8.29–34). Confessing Christ—even correctly, even publicly, even sincerely—does not mean that one is a true follower.

But I have been on a spiritual retreat. Yes, but the disciples also often withdrew from the hustle and bustle of Jesus' ministry to lonely places for retreats led by Jesus himself (e.g., Mark 6.31–32).

But I am involved in service projects. Good, but so were the disciples. They protected Jesus from the crowds (Mark 3.9), provided a boat for him (Mark 4.1), anointed and cured many who were sick (Mark 6.13), distributed food to thousands of hungry people on two occasions (Mark 6 and 8), arranged transportation for Jesus into Jerusalem (Mark 11.1–8), prepared Passover (Mark 14.12–16) and served in other ways.

But I have been on a mission trip. According to Mark 6.7–13, the Twelve went out two by two, preaching as Jesus had, without money, food, or extra provisions. But all the while they were in the dark about true discipleship.

Hardly a thing could be said in our favor that could not be said of the disciples in Mark's story. In Mark 10.28 Peter even said, "We have left everything to follow you!" and he was right. They had left homes, families, occupations and more to follow Jesus through storms and controversies and want. Yet their perception of Jesus and of discipleship was fuzzy at best. Their vision was impaired. It was as if people looked to them like trees walking around. If they needed corrective vision, then surely we do.

SELF-DENIAL AND CROSS-BEARING

Thus Jesus' message to those who would follow him today is the same as that to the Twelve: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mark 8.34). It is not likely that any of us here today will have to take up crosses and die for our faith—although we should not forget that many in our world do precisely that. In the twentieth century and this young twenty-first century, many times more Christians have been persecuted and killed for their faith than in all the early centuries that we usually think of as times of Christian persecution. But if being a disciple of Jesus does not necessarily lead to martyrdom, it does necessarily involve self-denial. And that self-denial is, as it always has been, countercultural and costly—not costly in the flippant way that we often speak of cross-bearing and sacrificing ("I'm all out of peanut M&Ms; oh, well, we all have a cross to bear," or "I'll give up brussels sprouts throughout Lent"—when I never eat green things anyway).

True discipleship entails—as it always has—self-denial. Of all the idols that compete for our devotion and preclude God's rule, by far the most powerful and effective is the self. This is surely why in the same breath that Jesus calls for cross-bearing—indeed, even before he calls for taking up one's cross—he calls for denying of self. Martyrdom is not the essence of discipleship, although martyrdom sometimes results from discipleship. Giving up things is not the essence of discipleship, although discipleship usually requires giving up some things. Discipleship, first and foremost, is the de-throning of self in order to allow God to rule. And the great paradox is that in *denying* ourselves, we *find* ourselves. "For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it" (Mark 8.35). Losers are keepers! As C.S. Lewis put it,

Christ says, "Give me your all. I don't want so much of your time and so much of your money and so much of your work; I want you . . . No half-measures are any good . . . Hand over the whole natural self, all the desires which you think innocent as well as the ones you think wicked—the whole outfit. I will give you a new self instead."¹

Have you ever wondered why pigeons walk as they do, bobbing their heads back and forth with each step? Why don't they walk like regular people? I read recently—whether it is true I don't know—that it is because they cannot focus their eyes when their heads are moving. To adjust its focus the pigeon has to bring its head to a complete stop between steps, as the rest of its body keeps moving. Whether this is accurate or not, it is certainly true that in our spiritual lives we are in such constant motion that we would do well to stop occasionally—probably often—and refocus. One way to do this is to read the Gospel of Mark (in one sitting, if possible; it can be done in a couple of hours) and observe carefully the portrayal of the disciples—their blind spots, their myopic vision, their short-sightedness, their other forms of visual impairment—as a way of discerning and correcting our own.

This is no instant fix, because self-denial is a process and not a one-time thing. In Mark's second story of the healing of a blind person, the one that follows and brings closure to the large section on discipleship that begins with our lesson text, Bartimaeus follows Jesus "on the way" when his sight is restored (Mark 10.46–52). "On the way" is Mark's language for the way of the cross, the way of discipleship. Discipleship is indeed a way, a journey, a process. But it is a process that will never even begin without an intentional denial

1. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Collier Books, 1960), 167.

of the primacy of self and an embracing of God's rule. Hear again Jesus' challenge to all who would follow him then or now:

"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the Gospel will save it" (Mark 8.34–35).

"If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all" (Mark 9.35).

". . . whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10.43–45).

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