My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Lord of our Hearts, Minds, Souls, and Spirits, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in Your sight, our strength and our Redeemer, Amen.

Do we remember last week’s sermon? What was it about? (take all answers). Yes, that’s right, we talked about the Sons of Zebedee, James and John, and they were trying to once again figure out how to get one-up on the rest of the disciples. They, and we, don’t learn easily, always asking something of God for our wants and desires.

This week we have another person who demands Jesus’ attention. Bartimaeus sensed that the man passing by was more than just one of the many two-bit prophets roaming around promising miracles and liberation from the oppression of Herod and Rome. We know this because he shouts out more than just Jesus’ name. He cries out, “Son of David”, a title that affirms him as Messiah.

And that affirmation is interesting because as much as Jesus has done, there is no one that has proclaimed that Jesus is the Messiah outside of the circle of the twelve disciples, and even Peter’s affirmation was grudging at best. Bartimaeus’ cry prepared for Jesus’ dramatic entry into Jerusalem. And unlike the disciples, who saw Jesus as a person who could get them closer to God’s glory, Bartimaeus asks not for glory. What does he want? (take all answers). That’s right. Mercy.

Now, I’m bringing in last week’s sermon for a reason, not just to test our collective memory skills. And that’s because Jesus responds to both the Sons of Zebedee and Bartimaeus the same way, asking them the identical question, “what do you want me to do for you?”.

This is probably the most important question that God still asks of us—“what do you want me to do for you?” And we get the answer wrong quite a bit, because we put it in terms of what WE want done for OURSELVES.

There’s our ego again, getting in the way of doing what we should. Petty rivalries, nonsense arguments, and continuous disagreements do very little to build trust or cohesion between persons or in any group. They’re destructive in three ways: First, they damage goodwill, trust, and peace. Second, they can hamper progress toward producing any kind of beneficial outcome or agreed goal. And last, they tend to make us SELF-centered, rather than love-centered. The crowds, which are an allegory for the world, which by the way means all of us, are still jostling Jesus, making assumptions about him, testing him, rejecting him. But it was natural to shield Jesus from being harassed, right? When crowds get restless, they act out, and in this instance, they act out their impulses on a blind beggar.

Beggars are unable to earn a living, then as now. Medical help is not readily available, then, as now. People tended to ignore their obligation for caring for the least of these, then as now. Beggars cannot, then, as now, escape their life.

The crowd tried to silence Bartimaeus. A blind person had no way to see their way through the crowd to touch Jesus’ robe. So a blind person has no option but to shout all the more, “Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me!” Most folks will compare this to the other blind healing in Mark’s Gospel. I think it’s deeper than that.

Bartimaeus is not asking for money. He’s not asking for housing, or for a job, or relief for his physical pain. He’s asking for recognition of his personage. He’s asking for compassion, acknowledgement, and that he matters, too. “Son of David,” O blessed of God, “have mercy on me.”

Curiously, after the crowd nearly tramples past him, trying to shush him, once Bartimaeus is recognized, the crowd suddenly becomes his friend. Another lesson in humanity, isn’t it? How quickly we switch sides once Jesus calls him out. “Cheer up! On your feet! He’s calling you.”

My goodness, we are fickle. I like this story because it so clearly demonstrates the problem: a poor blind person is set against the twelve disciples, deliberately by our Gospel writer. The Twelve have followed Jesus all this way and are still bickering. And Jesus has demonstrated, and told us, through his healing, teaching, and deeds that it is the poor, the disinherited, the brokenhearted, the ones who are on the edges of society that are most likely to see God and see God’s purposes. But let’s consider this, as we did last week and when Mark Rideout was here preaching about being “on the Way” to discipleship.

We are sitting here comfortably playing armchair quarterback, aren’t we? It's easy to criticize the disciples for their inability to see the things Jesus is showing them. But the things he's showing them aren't easy. Suffering? Betrayal? Death? What might any of us do if our beloved teacher told us these things? Some things are just too hard to grasp; some things are better left alone; sometimes seeing isn't all it's cracked up to be.

That's especially true in the life of faith, isn't it? We find it’s soooo much easier to focus only on the happy parts of faith--God's love for everyone, God's desire for our well-being, the hope we find in God. We’ve talked about the faith that engages only the happy parts, right? Joel Osteen radio can give you that wild and weird form of the Gospel if you want. But here at GCCC, we have lived long enough and seen enough to know that mature faith also engages the hard things...sickness, betrayal, death, divorce, job loss, poverty. And big things, too, like human trafficking, corporate corruption, climate change, hunger, war, refugees, discrimination, domestic violence.

Seeing can be dangerous. It can call into question everything we've ever believed. It can dismantle our faith, our theology, and our world. Seeing can devastate us.

And yet...and yet...a big part of following Jesus is seeing things as they really are. Why else would he try to show his disciples not once, not twice, but three times what was going to happen to him in Jerusalem? Seeing must be important to the life of faith.

So if seeing is important to the life of faith and also has the potential to devastate us, what are we to do? Do we keep our hearts open but our eyes closed? Is there some way as a person of faith to keep both our eyes and our hearts open? What I'm asking is, "How do we survive seeing?"

Just as Jesus tried to show his disciples time and again, when we look at the world at its ugliest, hardest, and most fragile--when we see the world in the context of Jesus, we also see…if we really look…we see resurrection. We might have to look at the ugly, hard, fragile things a long time before it happens, but eventually, always in the context of Jesus, we will see resurrection.

I’ll leave you with these final thoughts. James and John only wanted triumph. Bartimaeus only wanted to mercy. Which one really had their eyes opened, to see clearly, and then immediately follow God along the Way, according to God’s purposes? At this point, Jesus goes to Jerusalem. He’s tired of talking and they won’t listen. But do we understand what Bartimaeus experienced and it’s implications for all of us, or are we still the bickering disciple? Do we want triumph, or mercy? Do we see, with clear, true, spiritual eyes that choice, or are we still blind with 20/20 vision sitting right here, right now? All faith looks on the happy parts of life. But only mature faith dares to look at the hard parts, too. And that’s why we say that there is no other way to new life than through the cross, through a mature faith, and why we must not trample over a blind person calling from the edge of the crowd to each of us, and all of us. Have mercy on me, O Son of David, have mercy on me.

Thanks be to God, Amen.