



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

The Optics of Faith_ - The Twenty Second Sunday After Pentecost- 10_24_2021

I speak to you today as a sinner to sinners, as the beloved of God to God's beloved, as one called to bear witness to those called to bear witness. Amen.

I want to begin today by talking a bit about the piece of art that's on the cover of the bulletin that's in your hands, or if you're at home is being presented right next to me right now. And this piece of art has been done by an artist known as Manuel Solano. Solano was born just outside of Mexico.

This piece of portraiture, which is a self portrait that Solano painted in 2015, it was preceded by a couple of moments in their life that make it an incredible work of art to me. The first moment that happened to Solano is that Solano came out as transgender, probably around 2013. And then because of their identity, they were barred from healthcare in Mexico. And so when Solano contracted HIV in 2014, they could not get medical attention and they contracted a bacterial infection that caused them to go blind.

So this portrait that was painted in 2015 happened after Solano had gone completely blind. Earlier on in their career, the art that they did, which had some notice was known for its hyper-realism, there was a deep intent to follow every single trace in the visual field of the object being represented. But Solano realized that there was no way they could continue being an artist in the same way. So with the help of an assistant, after imagining a picture in their mind, Solano asked the assistant to place some pins and pipe cleaners and string on the canvas. And bit by bit often working with their fingers, Solano began to trace and paint this portrait.

And oftentimes as they worked, Solano would have to wait until the paint had dried and then feel the canvas one more time before adding any additional color. So this painting has been done by someone who is blind and someone who has somehow learned to see in another way. And there are three questions that I think are really pertinent to this painting that I want to lift up for you today.

The first question that is key for us to notice is this painting asks a question: who sees me? Solano does not want to be known as a transgender artist. In an interview that they did with a major art journal, they said they wanted to be known simply as an artist who happened to be transgender. And yet there is in

this painting, a question: who sees me? Who welcomes me? Who includes me? Do you, the viewer see me?

And there is a kind of elaborate kind of semaphore in the painting that signifies the identification of the person being painted and the artist painting that person, which is the same, that Solano is a member of the LGBTQ community. The way the hair appears, the way it is cut, the subtle hint of purple highlight, the two piercings on the lip. These are a kind of semaphore and identification that asks us to see Solano as they are, as they truly are.

The second question that I think is incredibly important for us to see in this painting is how do I see? The whole way in which Solano had to capture again the skill of being an artist is incredibly important for us to notice, because in that moment, Solano had to capture what it truly meant to be an artist. It is sometimes said that artists are never poor. And perhaps that is true, but I prefer the definition of an artist that was given by Flannery O'Connor, which is that an artist sees things as they are, and not as they appear to be.

So this painting is a kind of decision to follow through on an artistic vision that sees the work of art as involving more than the eyes. And it is a complete and utter miracle that Solano was able to somehow learn to paint by using other senses and to fulfill the vocation they had as an artist. It required an act of faith, you might say. A faith that is stronger than believing something that is hoped for, but a faith that is willing to enter into chaos and destruction and death and exclusion and to find some way of still being true to itself.

The third question that is asked in this painting, I believe, is what is being seen? The title of the painting is Suffering. And for Solano, this painting, I would suggest to you is a kind of communication about chaos and suffering in our lives. At the right of the painting you see an empty play structure. And this is to speak to a loss of innocence, a time in which childish things have to be left behind. And you'll also notice on the right side, the foliage is green. And on the other hand, on the left side of the painting, you have a kind of winter that has hit the landscape.

And you see the same kind of suffering in the eyes of Solano depicted in this painting, one eye is open and the other is obscured. And this is to speak about the suffering that they have experienced as an artist, as someone who has been stricken by an unjust health system, as someone who has suffered from exclusion. And yet somehow is able to work through that suffering to engage in communication.

To suffer is not nearly to feel pain, but to suffer is to experience a kind of power over us that we cannot resist. And we somehow have to bear. And for Solano, that title of the painting, Suffering, is a reach to us to see in our own suffering a kind of community. It's an invitation for empathy. It's a hope that the community

created by this painting by the viewer would actually create something larger that they can lean into.

Now, I find this painting to be remarkable in and of itself, but I think that what struck me when I was reviewing it this week is it's an incredible way to see the power of today's reading from the gospel of Mark. Here we see Jesus on His way from Jericho to Jerusalem, where he will be crucified.

And we see Jesus in the moment in which He is leaving the city and someone who has been excluded from the beginning. Someone who would never be allowed further into the temple, a blind person named Bartimaeus, who had been declared ritually unclean and unworthy of being a priest, that person decides, when they hear that Jesus is coming through, to plead for mercy. And so again, we have another kind of repetition of the questions that you find in Solano's portrait. Here we see again, that question: who sees me? And Bartimaeus is hoping that somehow in the midst of his exclusion, that Jesus sees him. And of course Jesus hears him and then sees him and then heals him.

You also see in today's reading from Mark this incredible moment in which Bartimaeus has to see Christ in another way, even though this is a passage about sight and the restoration of sight, it's also a passage where almost everything is conveyed by word of mouth and hearing. And Bartimaeus hears about Jesus and then has faith to deny the opposition, to step into the chaos, to walk through that shadow of death so that he might find Jesus. Faith here is not merely the belief in things larger than us, but again, here, faith is the willingness to look into chaos and destruction and disease and even suffering.

And finally, you see in today's gospel, a repeat of the question, what do we see? Because Bartimaeus does not return even for his cloak, which was probably his only possession, but at the end of the gospel, he decides to follow Jesus on the way, the *hodos*. And in the New Testament, that word "way," *hodos*, is never used to simply indicate a path or a road; it's meant to convey a following of Jesus. As Jesus makes His way to His death, so Bartimaeus goes, so that he might participate in that death that happens on Good Friday and in that resurrection that happens on that first Easter day. His healing is not, in other words, an end in itself, but a way for him to step more closely into the self that Jesus is calling him to be.

Now over the past few weeks, we've been talking about this term called "thriving" that we have been structuring all of our education around. I want to suggest to you that the two examples we have before today of Solano and Bartimaeus, both of them have a kind of witness to thriving. Thriving is different than surviving because surviving happens when things get better. Thriving happens when we get better, but the "we" who gets better and thriving is often the person that God has called us to be in the midst of death, in the midst of suffering, in the midst of chaos. Thriving, when we are followers of Jesus, will

always carry inside of itself an image of the Cross. And so it is in today's gospel. And so it is, I would suggest, even faintly found in this brilliant painting.

From the beginning, Christian writers have often spoken about blind Bartimaeus as a kind of prism through which to see our Christian life. John Newton wrote that beautiful hymn, *Amazing Grace*. "I once was blind, but now I see," and this is an indication of how powerful today's gospel has been in our hymnody and in our poetry.

But the most important poem that I've found, and it's one I want to conclude with today, is from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. In 1841, Longfellow was reading the Gospel of Mark one morning and he wrote the following to a friend:

"I was reading... in Greek, the last seven verses of which contain the story of blind Bartimaeus, and always seemed to me remarkable for their beauty. At once the whole scene presented itself to my mind in lively colors—the walls of Jericho, the cold wind through the gateway, the ragged, blind beggar, his shrill cry, the tumultuous crowd, the serene Christ, the miracle; and these things took the form I have given them above..." in the following poem.

And this is a poem that Wadsworth wrote in which he interposed Greek and English. This is what he wrote - and I'll try to translate it as best I can.

Blind Bartimaeus at the gates
Of Jericho in darkness waits;
He hears the crowd; he hears a breath
Say, "It is Christ of Nazareth!"
And calls in tones of agony,
lisoú, eleísou me

The thronging multitudes increase;
Blind Bartimaeus, hold peace!
But still, above the noisy crowd,
The beggar's cry is shrill and loud;
Until they say, "He calleth thee!"
Thárisei, égeire, foneí se

Then sayeth Christ, as silent stands
The crowd, "What wilt thou do at my hands?"
And he replies, "Oh, give me light!
Rabbi, restore the blind man's sight."
And Jesus answers Ἰpage

Ye that have eyes, yet cannot see,
In darkness and in misery,

Recall those mighty Voices Three.

I pístis sou sésokén se

lisoú, eleísou me. Jesus have mercy on me

Thársei, égeire, foneí se. Take courage, get up. He calls you.

I pístis sou sésokén se. Your faith has healed you.

What do we see but a merciful Lord looking at someone with mercy, looking at you. How do we see? We can only see Jesus now through faith, but that faith was enough for Bartimaeus. It is enough for you. It steers you through chaos. It steers you through death. It steers you through disease. It steers you through suffering. And what do we see? We see a Christ who has come to us and taken on all of those forces of chaos and death and disease and destruction and exclusion, so that we might be transformed and changed and made new.

Thanks be to God.