

Mark 10:46 They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. 47 When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” 48 Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” 49 Jesus stood still and said, “Call him here.” And they called the blind man, saying to him, “Take heart; get up, he is calling you.” 50 So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. 51 Then Jesus said to him, “What do you want me to do for you?” The blind man said to him, “My teacher, let me see again.” 52 Jesus said to him, “Go; your faith has made you well.” Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

A VISION CHECK

Several years ago my wife insisted that I go to the optometrist. She said that my vision wasn't what it used to be.

I objected of course. I just knew that I could see just fine. I'm not getting older. I'm just getting better.

Imagine my surprise and chagrin when I was fitted with a pair of glasses to correct my vision both near and far. I was oblivious to the fact that I couldn't see.

Of course the problem wasn't just my eyesight. It was also my vanity.

I didn't want to admit that I no longer had 20/20 vision. I didn't want to admit that I was getting older. In a sense it was my own stubbornness that kept me blind.

SELF IMPOSED BLINDNESS

Today's lesson is a story about those who are blind and those who want to see.

In some cases blindness is a self-imposed condition. Sometimes we do not see because we do not want to see. We do not want to face an unpleasant fact or we do not have the courage to face a great threat or challenge. So, we choose not to see. We choose to be “blind.”

In Mark's gospel there are many who choose to be blind when it comes to Jesus. For example, on many occasions Jesus does the impossible. He does what only God can do. He gives sight to the blind or heals the lame.

But, do the religious leaders “see” the miracles as a sign that the Kingdom of God has come near in this man Jesus? Not at all. Instead they complain that Jesus is doing these things on the Sabbath or they even suggest that he is doing these things in the name of the devil.

They cannot see the obvious power of God in Jesus because they do not want to see. They are entirely focused on maintaining their own power and station in life. Their spiritual sensitivity has been dulled by their own desires. And so Jesus says that these leaders are “blind guides of the blind.” (Matthew 15:14)

They have a problem seeing because they “strain at a gnat but swallow a camel!” (Matthew 23:24) In other words, the religious leaders know the details of God’s word but they are blind to the bigger picture. They are blind to the power of God that is revealed in Jesus.

This blindness is not limited to Jesus’ enemies. We have seen in our study of Mark this year that the disciples were often blind to the Kingdom as revealed in Jesus as well. In the case of the disciples their blindness was due to a lack of courage.

When Jesus told his disciples to deny themselves, take up a cross and follow him, the disciples responded by saying, “Jesus, you’re confused. You’re overwrought. Think about what you’re saying.”

And no matter how many times Jesus repeated the message or how strongly he proclaimed it the results were the same. The disciples just refused to accept what Jesus was saying. They were blind to the message of the cross because they wanted to be blind.

BE QUIET!

It seems to me that in today’s lesson the crowd that follows Jesus is blind. They too are blind to who Jesus really is and what Jesus has really come to do.

When a blind man on the side of the road shout, “Jesus, Son of David have mercy on me!” what do they do? They tell the blind man to shut up. They sternly ordered him to be quiet.

Literally this phrase means, “They rebuked him many times.” This wasn’t just one or two people telling the blind man to be quiet. This was the entire crowd turning on Bartimaeus telling him in no uncertain terms to “zip it.”

I’m not sure why they told the blind man to be quiet. Perhaps they thought that Jesus didn’t need to be bothered with a mere blind beggar who sat by the side of the road.

Or maybe they were profoundly disturbed by the title that the blind man gave Jesus. Bartimaeus cried, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.” Jesus, Son of David sounds suspiciously like a Messianic title, and if that’s true these were dangerous words.

The crowd could have said in effect, “Come on Bartimaeus. We need to get you home. You’re obviously blind to the danger that you’re putting all of us in by saying these things. The Romans have spies everywhere.”

But, the blind man was not intimidated by the crowd. The more they tried to get him to hush up the more he shouted, “Son of David, have mercy on me.” The commotion got Jesus’ attention. He stopped and called for this blind man who was making such a fuss.

You’ll remember that in much of Mark’s Gospel Jesus is telling people to “hush up” about who he is and what He has done. (Theologians call this the Messianic secret motif.) But, Jesus doesn’t try to hush up this man. Instead, he calls him.

THE CALL

The people tell Bartimaeus that Jesus is calling him, and Bartimaeus throws off his cloak, jumps up and heads toward the voice of Jesus. Some commentators note that the blind often used their cloak during the day to catch coins as they begged.

So, when Bartimaeus jumped up and threw off this cloak perhaps there were coins in it from his day’s collections and the coins went rolling down the road. But, he didn’t care. Bartimaeus was willing to give up everything to follow Jesus just as the twelve disciples had left their homes and jobs to follow Jesus earlier.

When the blind man makes it to Jesus, Jesus asks Bartimaeus a straightforward question, “What can I do for you?”

And Bartimaeus replies, “I want to see again.”

THE BLIND WILL SEE

Blind people in the ancient world were treated with contempt by some people. They thought that blindness was due to some unrighteous act or some sin against God. There are quite a few passages in the Old Testament that suggest this is true. Blindness was not only a disability; it was also a curse

In addition to this, blindness was something for which there was no cure. You might get over a cold or a high fever but being blind and then one day being able to see again; that didn’t happen so much. In fact it didn’t happen at all.

According to the prophets of old the blind would only be cured when the Messiah came. When the Messiah came then the incurables would be cured. The blind would see, the deaf would hear, and the lame would walk.

Well, when the blind man asked to see, he was saying in effect, “Son of David, I think you’re the Messiah. I think you can take away my blindness, and I want to see again.” Bartimaeus had

faith not only in Jesus' ability to do the impossible and heal his blindness. Bartimaeus "saw" that Jesus was the Messiah, and he believed that the Messiah could restore his sight.

Isn't this ironic. Only the blind man really see Jesus. And those who had sight were blind. The crowd needed their vision checked. They longed for a Messiah, and yet they didn't recognize the Messiah when he was standing right in front of them.

FAITH AND SIGHT

Jesus told Bartimaeus that his faith had made him well. But, being well was more than just having his sight restored. Being well meant that Bartimaeus was a person who had 20/20 faith as well as 20/20 vision. Actually that word translated "made you well" is the Greek word "sozo" which means saved.

His faith in Jesus, his trust in Jesus saved him.

This is where faith begins. We come to Jesus to get our vision checked. We come to Jesus humbly admitting that we "can't see." But, we also come trusting that Jesus can restore our sight.

Some no doubt will try to stop us. They will say that we are foolish to believe that Jesus can give us hope. They will say that the blind don't get a second chance, that blindness is a permanent condition.

They will say things like, "You've made your bed now lie in it."
But, Jesus tells us, "Take up your bed and walk."

With Jesus the blind see and even the most hardened heart can be melted by the power of his love and grace. In the life and ministry of Jesus we learn that the word "hopeless" is not in God's vocabulary.

No matter what your problem if you throw off the old way of life and come to Jesus you can see again. You can be healed. You can be saved.

REFORMATION THEN

Today is Reformation Sunday. We think about our spiritual heritage and those who sought to purify the church back in the 16th century.

Luther and Calvin and the other Reformers discovered that over the course of time the church had become blind to the truth about God. Instead of relying upon the Bible to form her beliefs the church had begun to base her beliefs upon the traditions of men and women.

This led to a church that was blind to some of the most basic doctrines of the Bible, truths like: salvation is by grace through faith alone. And so the Reformers sought to point out these blind spots and bring the church back to Jesus.

But, as we all know their efforts were not well received. Many of the Reformers were killed, and the conflict was bitter and lasted for many years.

REFORMATION NOW

Sometimes we are blind because we choose not to see. We fall in love with our own traditions and our own way of doing things. We like it our way. We might celebrate Reformation Sunday with pomp and pride.

But, what would happen if a modern day Reformer came into our community of faith and suggested (horror of horrors) that we had to change our ways in order to follow Jesus more closely? I don't think that "Reformer" would be received very well. In fact it might even tell him to shut up!

We are in love with having it our way. But, to be a Christian means to do it Jesus' way. And that means coming to Jesus periodically for a vision check. When we are blind the only way to regain our sight is to find our way back to Jesus.

It's easy enough to talk about the courage of the Reformers and celebrate what they did in the 16th century. The more difficult task is to ask what needs to be reformed in our lives and in our churches today.

Where are our blind spots? Do we really want to follow Jesus? Do we really want to see? Do we really want to be healed? Do we really want to be saved? Or do we want to follow a "Jesus" that we have remade in our own image?

There's another catch phrase that came from the Reformation, "always reforming." The Reformers of the 16th century realized that if the church had become so blind to the gospel the first time then it was possible (even probable) that it could happen again.

We are often blinded by sin and the desire to make the gospel something that is more in line with what we want. Remember this was the temptation of the disciples from the very beginning, and it is our temptation as well.

Those early disciples thought that the Kingdom of God was about political power and personal gain. (In my opinion some of the distortions of the Gospel in the modern world also turn faith into a way of gaining personal and political power.)

But, according to Jesus the Kingdom of God was about personal sacrifice. The Kingdom of God was about having the courage and faith to follow Jesus on the way ... wherever that way might lead.

Do you know what the early church called itself? They were the people of “the way.” Those early Christians knew that faith was a journey and not a destination. Faith was a willingness to throw caution to the wind and “hit the road” with Jesus.

FAITH AND SIGHT

A preacher was leading a Bible study on this passage and asked, “Why did Jesus perform healing miracles?” Most people answered that Jesus performed miracles because that was the way to get people to believe in him.

But, one person said, “If that’s why Jesus healed people, then it didn’t work. How many of the people whom Jesus healed followed him? How many do we never hear of again?”

When you think about it this person had a point. In the Gospels healing does not always call forth faith ... even from the person being healed. Quite often (in fact almost always) when Jesus heals someone it just stirs up more controversy.

And yet this story is different. Jesus tells this blind man, “Go. Your faith has made you well.” In other words, Jesus said, “Go back home to live the ‘normal’ life that you had been denied all these years.”

And yet on this one point Bartimaeus does not obey Jesus. Instead of going back home he leaves home to follow Jesus on the way.

A healing story becomes a discipleship story.

If Bartimaeus had gone back home I doubt we would have known his name. He would have been just another nameless person who was healed by Jesus. But, we know his name. That’s the difference between this healing story and many of the others.

This was not just another blind beggar by the side of the road. This was Bartimaeus, Son of Timaeus. Apparently Bartimaeus did follow Jesus on the road to Jerusalem and even beyond.

People in the early church knew him and knew his story. The people of the early church said, “Bartimaeus? Sure we know him. He used to teach Sunday School in Galilee. He was blind but Jesus healed him, and he followed Jesus all the way to Jerusalem.

He even led the cheers on Palm Sunday when they all cried, ‘Hosanna, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’ That Bartimaeus could see the truth even when he was blind. We will always remember Bartimaeus.”

The choir sang an anthem a few weeks back and one of the lines went, “My faith is not in the healing; it’s in the healer.” That was Bartimaeus. And that’s why we know his name all these years later. Paul put it well in his second letter to the Corinthians. He wrote that we walk by faith and not by sight. (2 Corinthians 5:7)

Sometimes I think it’s people like Bartimaeus who help us see more clearly. Sometimes people like Bartimaeus seem to know instinctively what it really means to be a disciple of Jesus. Sometimes those that are new to the faith, those that have just had their eyes opened, those that have just been saved, those who are on the margins of life are the very ones who can help us really see Jesus.

We need to make sure that we don’t hinder those people. We need to make sure that we don’t try to shut those people up. Sometimes those are the very people who can help us see more clearly.

A BLIND MAN BRINGS SIGHT

The story is told of a blind man who stood on a bridge in London and was reading aloud from a Braille Bible. A gentleman on his way home stopped at the edge of the crowd that had gathered to listen.

At that very moment, the sightless man lost his place in the book of Acts 4:12 which says of Jesus, “Salvation is found in no one else; for there is no other name ...” While trying to find his place again, the blind man kept repeating the last three words he had just read, “No other name .. no other name ... no other name ...”

Some in the crowd smiled, but the inquisitive bystander went away impressed. Though he knew the Bible very well and knew this particular verse that the blind man was reading from memory, he still did not feel sure about his faith. He felt like his life was one blind turn after another.

But, the words of the blind man kept echoing in his mind ... no other name ... no other name. And then it came to him. He said, “I see it all now. I’ve been trying to be saved by my own works and prayers. But, Jesus alone can save me. He alone can heal what is broken in my life.”

He could then see for himself the truth of the Scripture that the blind man was reading that day. “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.”

From time to time we too need to hear the voice of a blind man calling, “Son of David, have mercy on me.” From time to time we too need to throw off that cloak of self-sufficiency, come to Jesus and trust him enough to follow him on the way.

Have you had your vision checked recently? Jesus loves you and he wants you to see more clearly.

Amen.