

**Proper 25****Finding Our Way****Mark 10:46-52**

*A sermon preached by the Rev. Richard Israel, Associate Rector, at St. Paul's Episcopal Church on Oct. 25, 2009.*

Earlier this week I joined other proud parents of aspiring thespians at the Fall Theatre Preview at Shaker Heights High School where my daughter is a member of the Senior Acting Ensemble. As I thought about this text, which is far more than another miracle story in the ministry of Jesus the healer, I recalled a movement piece performed by the ensemble members. In this piece, the performers demonstrated an act done by every one of us on a daily basis; the act of waking from sleep. However, following the narration of their instructor, the actors carefully, and with great awareness, showed us the subtlest movements that are part and parcel of waking up—movements of the head and neck, of limbs unfolding, of eyes blinking open, of sitting up with eyes open, but still not focused, not seeing what lies before us, and then finally integrating awareness and sight so that one is able to take action.

Healing stories in the Gospels never seem to be simply a reversal of physical misfortune. As we have examined the connections between faith and healing over the past three weeks, we have learned that healing, according to Biblical scholar John Pilch, refers to restoring meaning to life whether or not someone's physical condition improves. Pilch writes, "Human beings are meaning-seeking persons. Life is intolerable if it makes no sense, if it has no meaning." Perhaps the miracle stories when Jesus heals someone of blindness make this clearer than other healings. The connections between seeing and believing are so strong in the Gospel accounts that these miracles worked through Jesus almost always seem as much about growing in faith as they are about removing astigmatism or throwing away dark glasses.

The story of Bartimaeus illuminates what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. This is made clear when one sees this story in the context of Mark's gospel in which teaching about discipleship is a major emphasis and the disciples of Jesus are examples par excellence of people who don't get who Jesus is and what it means to "follow" him. The setting of the story is in Jericho, on the edge of Jerusalem, where Jesus is heading to perform his ultimate miracle of restoration and healing on the cross. As they have traveled toward Jerusalem, the disciples have been busy trying to figure out who will sit at Jesus' right hand when he establishes his kingdom, totally missing the point that the reign of God is about community and service, not power and authority.

Not long after the disciples have been bickering over their places in glory, a blind man by the side of the road recognizes Jesus for who he is. Bartimaeus is the paragon of faith in Mark's gospel, but his faith is not about reciting the correct confession or subscribing to certain dogmas. His faith lies in his unrelenting conviction that Jesus can and will rescue him from his need. In contrast to the disciples who were eyewitnesses of Jesus' miracles and teaching, but did not "understand" what they saw, Bartimaeus' vision of Jesus and Jesus' saving mission was "20-20". As a result, Bartimaeus is not caught in that state of suspended awareness between being asleep and awake. We see what faith is about in what he *does*, his actions.

First, Bartimaeus grasps who Jesus is. Only here in Mark's gospel do we hear Jesus addressed as "Son of David". Dianne Bergant writes, "'Son of David' identifies Jesus not only as a descendant of this royal figure but also as the long awaited one who was to fulfill both the religious and political expectations of his people." In the next chapter of Mark, as Jesus enters Jerusalem's gates on Palm Sunday, we will hear this royal refrain as he comes to David's city to complete his saving mission.

Bartimaeus is also one who persists despite hindrances. As he calls to Jesus, people try to silence him. This detail reminds us that beggars, especially blind ones, were at the bottom rung of social privilege in ancient Israel, much as they are today. However, believing with all his heart that Jesus is the one through whom God's healing mercy will be dispensed, Bartimaeus yells even more loudly until his cries reach Jesus' ears.

Faith, we see through Bartimaeus, anticipates a miracle of transformation. When Jesus hears his cry, he invites Bartimaeus to his side. Now those who sought to shut him up must assist in Jesus' ministry to him. Then Mark adds a critical detail. Bartimaeus tosses aside his cloak and "sprang up". Matthew Skinner writes, "Obviously he expects to regain his sight, for a blind beggar would ordinarily do well to keep his possessions close at hand. He obviously expects a change in his status. When Bartimaeus casts off his cloak, he confidently prefigures that he will no longer sit on his garment dependent upon handouts from passersby."

Finally, Bartimaeus' faith is exemplary because he asks for the right thing. Just as in the preceding story in which James and John came to Jesus requesting a favor, Jesus asked Bartimaeus "What do you want me to do for you?" Trusting that Jesus is God's promised Messiah who would restore creation to its intended balance and harmony, Bartimaeus answers, "That I would see again." He is not requesting special privileges as the disciples did. Instead he is looking for that restoration of spiritual, social and material wholeness that will be made possible when God reigns.

When Jesus heals Bartimaeus, he says, "Go; your faith has made you well." Ironically, the man's response is not to "go" but to "follow Jesus," presumably straight into Jerusalem and into his confrontation with the powers that would sentence him to die. In Mark's gospel, Bartimaeus is the only one of the people healed by Jesus who follows him on his way, trusting that not even the reality of the cross can compete with the joy of living with and for God.

In my Lutheran tradition the last Sunday of October is celebrated as Reformation Sunday. The church, Christ's body charged with making his mercy known to the world, is meant to be a "sanctuary" where those who have wandered from God, in whose number we are all included, as well as those who are shoved to the margins of society are welcomed at Christ's banquet of restoration. In order to fulfill this mission, the church must constantly be reforming.

Hindsight, we know is always 20/20 and it is easy for the church to celebrate reformers of the past even as we are blind to the present need for reformation and restoration. I grew up in Memphis, TN during the civil rights movement. My family and I faithfully attended a Lutheran church where our pastor referred to M. L. King because he thought Dr. King's advocacy for justice did a disservice to the name of Martin Luther. While today we celebrate

Martin Luther King as a martyr of the church, in the 60's most of the adults in my life were shaking their heads and lamenting all the trouble he was causing. Reflecting back on my childhood I can only shake my head today at the memories of segregation so pervasive it touched every aspect of life and a system of white privilege that thankfully no one would embrace today.

Mary Anderson wrote, "These are the rhythms of reformation. The troublemakers become heroes. The radical new ways eventually become beloved traditions. We are always moving from blindness to sightedness, from unfaithfulness to faithfulness. But reformations teach us that we continue to need reform."

Looking at the story of Bartimaeus, who saw from the side of the road that Jesus is the promised One of God, we must acknowledge that religious people can be prone to myopia. Looking at church history--distant and recent--we need to confess the ways in which the church has failed to follow Christ. And so we might ask, what corners of the church, of society, need serious reformation today? Where are our blind spots? What injustice do we allow to go unchallenged that will one day cause our children or grandchildren to shake their heads at how blind we were to the gospel? Whom do we avoid seeing and whose voices do we seek to muffle? With what theological and political debates do we preoccupy ourselves so we don't have to follow Jesus on the way of the cross?

These are not questions posed to make us feel guilty. Rather, like the persistent calling to Jesus by Bartimaeus that enabled Jesus to extend the parameters to which he dispensed compassion and grace, the church's concern to be "always reforming" is an exercise of faith. To live in this way is to cling to the promises of God who calls us to be partners in the mending of creation.

Martin Luther described the passionate, reforming life of faith in these words: "This life therefore is not righteousness, but growth in righteousness; not health, but healing, not being, but becoming, not rest but exercise. We are not what we shall be but we are growing toward it, the process is not yet finished but it is going on; this is not the end but it is the road." With eyes and hearts open to the mercy of God which is new every day, may we see Christ in our midst and follow where he leads, trusting that his way will help us grow in faith, hope and charity and obtain the promises of God.