

Blind Bartimaeus
Preacher: Rev. Lauren Lorincz
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15:44

"Blind Bartimaeus" Pilgrim Church UCC, October 25, 2015, (Mark 10:46-52) Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

After graduating from college a semester early, I worked full-time in the coffee shop at Books-A-Million in Burlington, North Carolina. With my college degree in hand, I made \$5.45 an hour plus a few tips. Times were tough. Every morning, one of our regulars stopped in to buy a newspaper, get 4 shots of espresso, and leisurely read while enjoying all that glorious caffeine. This older man was so rude and condescending, never deigning to put his money into my outstretched hand. He would put it right on the counter rather forcefully and never tipped even though I made his drink to his satisfaction almost seven days a week. Our whole staff couldn't stand him. Sometimes he had two "friends" who met him. Except when he spent time browsing books they would trash him, telling each other how arrogant and terrible he was.

When it was official that I was off to Andover Newton, I let my managers know and they came to the coffee shop to congratulate me and hear more about this next chapter. Mr. Snarky 4 Shots of Espresso was clearly listening to our conversation—overhearing that I graduated from Elon and earned a scholarship to Seminary. The next morning he was so nice to me: asking about Andover Newton and the United Church of Christ, telling me things to check out in the Boston area, and he's a devout Episcopalian by the way. Even though it was kind-of a relief that the Episcopalians have him and not us, his change in demeanor after overhearing our conversation was just so lame. When I was just a young woman working in the coffee shop it was okay to treat me in a certain manner, but that changed when he learned more of my story . . . and he finally began to leave me small tips.

In the Bible, time and again we hear stories about seeing and sight. Like that famous line from the hymn "Amazing Grace": I was blind but now I see. That older man in North Carolina had trouble seeing people. He never really saw me or the rest of the staff at Books-A-Million. He didn't see that his friends weren't actually his friends as they spoke so negatively behind his back. Maybe he couldn't even see that the way he treated people wasn't being as devout an Episcopalian as he claimed to be. Yet was I much better? Could I see past his mean outer exterior to the Child of God he is underneath? Could I see him even for a moment the way that God must see him? Not really.

This morning's text is about being blind and then seeing. We can't lose the metaphorical meaning by getting so hung up on the physical or literal healing of a blind man. Yes, this is the story of Blind Bartimaeus—the final story of Jesus' miraculous healings in the Gospel of Mark before his entry into Jerusalem at the end of his life. Biblical healing stories can make us uncomfortable, but there's a lot of meaning whether a story is factually true or not. This story focuses on the blindness of the disciples and ironically Blind Bartimaeus being the one who really sees Jesus. Jesus' encounter with Blind Bartimaeus shows two main points: the inadequacies of the disciples and the new social order Jesus created in his ministry.

After we explore this, we're left with a whole lot of so what questions—are there people like Blind Bartimaeus who are crying out for help who we silence in our own time? Do we believe that following Jesus offers us wholeness and transformation? Do we see that a life of Christian discipleship is never easy but always worth it?

The Gospel of Mark is known for Jesus' calls to radical discipleship, and these calls happen as early as Chapter 1! Jesus proclaims, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people" calling Simon, Andrew, James, and John to abandon their boats and fishing nets and become his companions immediately.[1] We're so optimistic for the disciples, thinking that these twelve people will help Jesus in preaching a new message to the people of Israel and the Gentiles in surrounding lands. Yet by the final chapters, Mark shows Jesus crucified and abandoned—with the ultimate betrayal coming from one of his own.

The story of Blind Bartimaeus shows the failure and inadequacies of the disciples. They've seen the mighty works performed by Jesus throughout the Gospel and still don't get it. The disciples are contrasted with Bartimaeus who is literally blind, but sees Jesus as the Messiah. The disciples are spiritually blind and continue to be blind to the transformation Jesus is offering.

On the way out of Jericho, Bartimaeus cries out for Jesus to have mercy on him. Yet "many sternly ordered him to be quiet." [2] It wouldn't be uncharacteristic for the disciples to be among those who ordered silence. Earlier they spoke sternly to the people who brought children to Jesus for him to bless after all. The disciples may have felt sympathy, but ultimately it's Bartimaeus' faith that makes him well. When Jesus asks, "What do you want me to do for you?" he says, "My teacher, let me see again." [3] Although visually impaired, Bartimaeus comes to see in every sense of the word by working with Jesus to experience wholeness. He joins the crowds of Jesus' followers—following him on the way. Bartimaeus responds to this act of mercy in his life by getting up and going, by following Jesus wholeheartedly.

We can also clearly see the new community created by Jesus, a community that proclaims radical inclusiveness. If Jesus is called to serve others, this must be true of Jesus' disciples in every time and in every place. This means all of us! The disciples' apparent shunning of Bartimaeus is disturbing in light of Jesus' teachings concerning the new community of believers that they've been hearing for ten long chapters in this Gospel. Jesus gets criticized for associating with the apparent dregs of society—lepers, beggars, prostitutes, cripples, tax collectors, people possessed by demons, and many who sinned in the eyes of the religious authorities. Jesus shows his followers that God's values are different than good "pious" people may imagine. We would hope that by the end of his life his own disciples would get that message loud and clear, only they don't in Mark's Gospel. And then the attention turns to us.

Are there people like Blind Bartimaeus who are crying out for help who we silence in our own time? Do we really believe that following Jesus offers us wholeness and transformation? Do we see that a life of Christian discipleship is never easy but always worth it?

It's often easier to not see the needs of others. There are so many issues we face in our world that can break one's heart. Gun violence, the plight of Syrian refugees, folks from Mexico and Central America fleeing violence, war in general, continued violence in the Middle East, hunger, systemic racism, the opioid crisis, transgender people being murdered at alarming rates—there are days when it's hard to look at the news and not feel hopeless. There are moments when we see modern-day examples of Blind Bartimaeus crying out for help on the side of the road. If we're really honest, we may want to be like those who sternly ordered him to be quiet. We don't want to hear it. We don't want to see it. We want to pass through those gates and be on our way. Jesus' first disciples certainly wanted to do that because it's hard to experience another person's brokenness.

It's hard to see people for who they really are if we can't get past the outer exterior. But a life devoted to a higher purpose (in our Christian language we may say that a life devoted to Jesus) can transform us and make us whole. There was a recent news story about an important debate that took place in a maximum security prison in New York State. Three men

incarcerated for violent crimes who are part of the Bard Prison Institute debated three undergraduates from Harvard. The prisoners won the debate having previously defeated debate teams from West Point and the University of Vermont. Afterwards one of the Harvard students was quoted as saying, “They caught us off guard.”[4]

The Bard Prison Institute began in 2001 to give a quality Liberal Arts education to motivated and talented prisoners. Of the 300 alumni who’ve earned degrees while in custody only 2% have returned to prison within three years. Compare this to 40% of ex-offenders returning to prison in New York State as a whole. We can’t often make accurate predictions about people we don’t even have the ability to see for who they are. Not for what they’ve done or haven’t done, but for who they truly are. People who are given opportunities to grow and better themselves and then turn their lives around can certainly catch us off guard.

Stories of being blind and then maybe truly seeing (whether in the Bible or New York State Prisons) end up being stories about grace. How God longs for all of us to receive God’s grace freely given because there’s nothing we can do to earn it anyway. Grace is what helps us to be disciples—going out into the world to follow the Way of Jesus. Discipleship is never easy, but it’s always worth it.

In the end, everyone who receives God’s grace becomes a part of Jesus’ community. We’re a community of people in the Church who receive grace and then can extend God’s love to all those like Blind Bartimaeus here and now. Because like so many other stories of healing in the Bible, this restoration of sight is about wholeness and how following Jesus on the Way will transform us even now. This is a story about what true sight looks like and how when we see others just for an instant with the love of God in our hearts—we can’t help but extend ourselves outside our comfort zones, our walls, our familiar places. So thanks be to God for those moment when once we were blind, but now we see! Oh, and please tip the people who make your fancy coffee in the morning! May it be so with us. Amen.

[1] Mark 1:17.

[2] Mark 10:48.

[3] Mark 10:51.

[4] Leslie Brody, “Prison vs. Harvard in an Unlikely Debate,” The Wall Street Journal, October 8, 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/an-unlikely-debate-prison-vs-harvard-1442616928>