

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Lib McGregor Simmons
Mark 10: 46-52
“A Re-formed Life”
22nd Sunday after Pentecost
October 25, 2015

Today’s Scripture lesson is Mark’s story of Jesus’s healing of a blind man by the name of Bartimaeus.

Some label it as a “healing story,” but I am a member of the court of opinion who judges it to fall into the category of a “call story.”

To grasp the thrust of the story as fully as possible, it is important to rewind stories about other calls which Jesus issued earlier in the 10th chapter of Mark and revisit them.

One of these is the text from which John Kuykendall preached two Sundays ago on our Stewardship Dedication Sunday. Jesus called a man who was sincere, respectable, religious, and rich. The man, however, cannot cut himself off from his many possessions. He resists the invitation of Jesus and winds up a grieving non-disciple. (1) Do the words that Mark uses to describe the man utterly break your heart, as they do mine, “When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions”?

The other story (or actually stories, because there are several of them) which can serve as a point of contrast for Jesus’s call to Bartimaeus is the unspooling of how the disciples misunderstand Jesus’s patient instruction about the nature of discipleship as they make their way down the road toward Jerusalem where Jesus will be arrested, suffer, and die. While Jesus talks about bearing crosses and the last being first, the disciples squabble like whiny four-year-olds who need a nap badly, fussing about who will be greatest in the kingdom. (2)

As this story of Jesus’s call to Bartimaeus is read, keep the rich man and his response to Jesus and the disciples’ misunderstanding in mind and consider them in contrast to the interaction that takes place between Jesus and Bartimaeus. Listen too for the three times that the word “call” appears in the text, in verse 49.

When I read this story and think of the contrast between the rich man and Bartimaeus, the word that springs to my lips –a very *theological* word, of course--is WOW!

Anybody can see why Jesus would call a sincere, respectable, religious, not to mention rich, man to be a part of his team. Some can even look at the disciples and say that while taken as individuals they weren’t much to speak of, put the twelve of them together and their varied gifts and experiences made for a decent lineup of talent that could be used for the sake of the kingdom.

But Bartimaeus?

Bartimaeus was blind, for heaven’s sake. And you know what that means.

Well, maybe you don’t know what that means because thankfully being blind in today’s world is not what it was in Jesus’s and Bartimaeus’s world. Today blindness is a physical condition, and that is all that it is. I don’t want to make light of the challenge that is to be a sight-challenged person in a seeing world in the 21st century (although, I must say that I am blessed to have had two blind friends who made it look easy which really awes me and frankly intimidates me), but it certainly doesn’t signify any kind of moral inferiority.

But it did in the Hebrew Scriptures.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, blindness is portrayed as an unmitigated evil. Physical blindness disqualified one from being a priest. It meant that you were ritually impure. Blind animals were regarded as unfit for sacrifice. Tobit, stricken with cataracts, believed that his blindness was a punishment for his sins and the sins of his people and prayed for death in preference to life as a blind man. The foolish and treacherous Samson was cruelly blinded by the Philistines, as well as enslaved and imprisoned. Blindness was a standard metaphor in the Hebrew Scriptures for the wickedness and foolishness of both Israel and its enemies. (3)

Bartimaeus was blind, blind in every way that was really bad in his day, and Jesus called him!

And do you know why?

Because that is the kind of God that God is. A God who calls people who are blind, imperfect, flawed.

Let me tell you about this God. God calls people like you and me who are blind. God calls people like you and me who are blind to the ways that possessions like our money, our stuff, our reputations, our images hold us captive and keep us from embracing the kind of whole, complete, lives that our hearts so deeply desire, so that like the rich man we time and again distance ourselves from God and our neighbors, so much so that our souls have become numb to the grief that we feel. God calls people like you and me who are blind to the ways that we wound each other with our sarcasm or our silence or our judgment or blame or simply our lack of grace in dealing with each other.

It is blind people like you and me and Bartimaeus, deeply flawed people inside and out, whom Jesus calls to join him in making God real in the world.

Did you notice how Bartimaeus responded to Jesus's call?

He threw off his cloak. Interesting, huh?

I'm not sure exactly what that means.

Maybe Mark is making a point of contrast between the many possessions that the rich man could not discard in order to follow Jesus and Bartimaeus who basically had only one worldly possession, his cloak, but who didn't give a thought to throwing that aside so that he could join Jesus as a disciple. Maybe Mark is saying that Bartimaeus is throwing aside the symbol of his blindness, for the cloak spread out before a blind person was essentially his tin cup, if you will. It was the public service announcement for all passers-by that this guy was blind, so could you throw a few coins on his cloak as a charitable contribution from the upstanding citizen that you are?

Maybe it is a little of both, or something else entirely.

I really don't know.

What strikes me as being more important than the fact that Bartimaeus cast aside his cloak is that he responded to Jesus's call by joining Jesus "on the way."

The term "on the way" has significance. Read the book of Acts, and you will find that this is how the Christian movement was first named. Before people who followed Jesus were called "Christians," they were called "people of the way."

And, of course, the "way," the "path," the "road" on which Bartimaeus deigned to travel with Jesus was the road that led to suffering and the cross.

And I can't help but think that Jesus was really glad to have Bartimaeus walking alongside him as he made the trip to his death. For, you see, Bartimaeus knew what it was to be viewed as a failure. He knew what it was to experience a living death, if you will. His experiences of being on the margins, of being judged to be "less than" and so forth, they were a part of him. And, while Mark never mentions Bartimaeus again, I know, I KNOW in my hearts of hearts, that he was right there with Jesus every step of the way and when Jesus's courage faltered, I believe that Bartimaeus was there to take his hand and help him to know that he was not alone and that if Bartimaeus wouldn't abandon him, then ultimately, his Holy Parent God would not abandon him either.

And the good news for us in all of this is that God doesn't just call us to use our time, our talent, our treasures, those "good" parts of ourselves that we don't mind everybody seeing. God calls us and will use ALL of us, and that means our failures, our vulnerabilities, our flaws and weaknesses, to bring in the kingdom.

And that is what it means to have a re-formed life, when we trust God so much that we begin to see that our weaknesses and our failures are fertile ground for a forgiving God to make each of us and the world more beautiful. (4)

We are celebrating Reformation Sunday today, remembering that on October 31, 1517, Martin Luther nailed 95 Theses, 95 statements protesting the sale of indulgences by the Roman Church, on the door of the castle church in Wittenburg, Germany. Lutherans make a very big deal of Reformation Sunday, Presbyterians a little less so since our theological heritage is not an interstate highway from Martin Luther to the present as theirs is but takes a route that zigs and zags. One can safely say, however, that the strong, triumphant hymn "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" is getting big play in churches around the globe today, and a lot of sermons are being preached about Martin Luther's courage in confronting the abuses of the church.

And I have no argument with this. I've preached some sermons myself in that vein from time to time.

But in my reading this week, I came across a story about Martin Luther that I had never heard before.

Martin Luther died in Eisleben, the place of his birth, and this is often presented as bringing his life and work full circle, in a sense. He preached his last sermon there. He preached his last sermon there to FIVE people. Only five people showed up for Martin Luther's last sermon. And do you know what? He was as mad as hell about it. He wrote a friend about it, despairing over his "failed reformation." (5)

I love it. I love it.

I love it, because what it says to me, and I trust to you, is that God uses our failed reformations over and over again to re-form our lives and the church and, yes, even the world.

I can't help but say "yes" to a God who calls and uses blind and flawed failures like Bartimaeus and you and me. And I invite you to say "yes" to this God too.

1. Walter Brueggemann, Charles B. Cousar, Beverly R. Gaventa, James D. Newsome, *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV-Year B* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 565.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Mary Ann Beavis, "From the Margin to the Way: A Feminist Reading of the Story of Bartimaeus," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, Vol. 14, No. 1, Spring 1998, 24.
4. Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Accidental Saints: Finding God in All the Wrong People* (New York: Convergent, 2015), 38.
5. David Lose, "Bartimaeus, Luther, and the Failed Reformation," www.workingpreacher.org, October 21, 2012.