

Sermon – 10/28/18

“Taste and See”

Psalm 34: 1-8 and Mark 10:46-52

23rd Sunday after Pentecost

Reformation Sunday and Stewardship Commitment Sunday

Davidson College Presbyterian Church – Davidson, NC

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As we were called to worship this morning, we heard the words of Psalm 34. The Psalm writer invites us to “Taste and See that the Lord is good.” Such rich imagery! Of course neither the tasting nor the seeing are as they seem. We do not literally taste the Lord like we might taste a delicious piece of chocolate cake or some of Chef Eric’s Bananas Foster like we enjoyed this past Wednesday Night in the Congregation House. And we do not necessarily see the Lord like we might see an amazing view of mountains splashed with the fall colors of orange, red, and yellow.

Instead - when the people of God taste and see, they enter into a rich experience of and relationship with the living God. The Psalm writer experienced God as one who delivered from danger and fear, one who provided refuge and care. We too are invited to experience the presence of the Lord in all of God’s splendor, majesty, glory, and love. The Psalmist invites us into a life-long experience caught up in awe and wonder.

As I was reading our gospel text for today it occurred to me that Bartimaeus might have understood this passage from the Psalms better than most. He experienced the wonder of God’s presence in Jesus Christ and afterwards, was truly able to see. He tasted of God and saw. His renewed physical sight, however, was not the most wonderful part of the story. What is truly amazing is the sight that his faith allowed him to have. He saw the wonder of new life in Jesus Christ and continued his life’s journey walking in the way of Jesus.

The stories that preceded this one in Mark are all about people who had been unable to see clearly. They didn’t get it. The crowds, the Pharisees, the rich man, the disciples, specifically James and John, they all had blind spots, unable to truly grasp the life that Jesus was calling them to live. They were either unable to fathom the radical nature of Jesus’ sacrificial love, or they were unwilling to accept it as truth.

The disciples argued over who was the greatest. James and John requested to be at the right and left hand of Jesus in glory. Blind Bartimaeus – son of Timaeus – [that’s what Bar – Timaeus means] just wanted to see. Jesus asked him the very same question that he had asked James and John, “What do you want me to do for you?” The disciples answered the question from a place of pride and arrogance. Bartimaeus answered from a place of humility and faith.

“Help me regain my sight. Let me see again!”

If Jesus asked you the question, “What do you want me to do for you?” How would you respond? And with what kind of attitude?

This past week the church lost a gifted pastor and writer in the person of Eugene Peterson. He died this past Monday after a long life of faithful discipleship. We often read the scriptures in the words of his transliteration of the scriptures known as *The Message*. For example, today's gospel story from Mark is re-written by Peterson to say the following about Bartimaeus: "Many tried to hush him up, but he yelled all the louder, "Son of David! Mercy, have mercy on me!"

Jesus stopped in his tracks. "Call him over."

They called him, "It's your lucky day! Get up! He's calling you to come!" Throwing off his coat, he was on his feet at once and came to Jesus.

Peterson certainly had a way with words. One of his first books is titled, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society*. In it he wrote about the slow process of learning to be a follower of Jesus. He explained how he, in his life of faith, tried to set aside those things he did best and attempted that which he did very clumsily – that is "opening himself to the frustrations and failures of loving, daring to believe that failing in love is better than succeeding in pride."

Peterson learned that the call of Jesus Christ is to selfless love which sets aside our wants, our wills, our pride and arrogance, and learns the slow humble walk of patience, kindness, generosity and service.

So - it is possible for us to see clearly who Jesus is – the Son of David (as Bartimaeus referred to him) – or the Messiah – the Christ (as Peter referred to him) – or a Good Teacher – (as the rich man referred to him). And it is also possible to misunderstand what any of those titles mean or what the call and message of this one would lead us to do. It is possible to see Jesus on the road between Jericho and Jerusalem and not really get that his life-giving journey is a gift to us and an invitation for us to enter into our own life-giving journey. Bartimaeus teaches us that we don't have to have physical sight to see who Jesus is and to understand what he does. He heals, he restores, he breaks down social barriers, he speaks with outcasts, he welcomes all to walk with him by giving up their lives in order to be born anew. He offers new life, new sight, and a new way to journey. Experiencing God teaches us this.

Come! "Taste and see!"

You may have heard the following story about a violinist. It has more to do with hearing than it does with tasting or seeing.

On a cold, January morning in 2007, a man began playing his violin in a busy Washington D.C. Metro Station. He played six pieces by Bach for about 45 minutes. During that time it is estimated that 2-3 thousand people passed through the station – most of them on their way to work. After 3 minutes a middle-aged man noticed there was a musician playing. He slowed his pace and stopped for a few seconds and then hurried to meet his schedule.

4 minutes later:

The violinist received his first dollar: a woman threw the money in the hat and, without

stopping, continued to walk.

6 minutes later:

A young man leaned against the wall to listen to him, then looked at his watch and started to walk again.

10 minutes after that:

A 3-year old boy stopped but his mother tugged him along hurriedly. The kid stopped to look at the violinist again, but the mother pushed hard and the child continued to walk, turning his head all the time. This action was repeated by several other children. Every parent, without exception, forced their children to move on quickly.

For 45 minutes the man played continuously. Only 6 people stopped and listened for a short while. About 20 gave money but continued to walk at their normal pace. The man collected a total of \$32.

No one seemed to notice when he stopped playing. No one applauded, nor was there any recognition.

No one knew that the violinist was Joshua Bell, one of the greatest musicians in the world. He played some of the most intricate pieces ever written, with a violin valued at \$3.5 million dollars. Two days before, Joshua Bell sold out a theater in Boston where the price of seats averaged \$100.

It makes you wonder what we may be missing.

Perhaps you have been in a group when asked to answer the question, “Where did you see God today?” Often times people must struggle to think back over the day’s events to find an experience of beauty or kindness or love. Is it possible that we often do not have our eyes and our hearts open to experience the presence of God? Is it possible that like those travelers in the DC Metro Station, we were too busy, too focused on our own priorities, goals, and deadlines to listen to the sweet music of the grace and love of the Creator of the Universe and the author of our lives?

I wonder what our blind spots are. What keeps us from being able to experience God’s presence and see with the new eyes that Jesus offers? What keeps us from responding along with Bartimaeus to the invitation of Jesus? What stops our joyful exuberance, our willing generosity, and our faithful discipleship?

This weekend my daughter was in the play *Romeo and Juliet* at Hough High School. I know the story and I’ve seen the play before so it surprised me to be as moved as I was by the profound meaning of the tragedy. Two households – the Capulets and the Montagues – have such a deep hatred for one another that fighting breaks out and destroys many lives, many hopes, and many dreams. Spoiler alert – the young lovers Romeo and Juliet die in the end. There is some hope in the end that the lessons learned from their death and the death of other characters in the story might lead to the reconciliation between the two families but the future is still uncertain. Perhaps William Shakespeare intended for that decision to be in our hands. Will

we continue to live by our narrow-minded opinions, our prejudices, and our hatred of the other? Will we continue to be guided by our pride, arrogance, and selfishness? Or will we open ourselves to a new way that leads to reconciliation and peace?

As Mark tells the story, Jesus is always inviting us to be open to an experience with the living God. When we taste and see God's goodness, our life takes on new purpose and meaning. Our hatred turns to love, our fear turns to faith, and our pride turns to humility. Bartimaeus shows us what it means to walk in this new vision.

There are a few more lessons that I think Bartimaeus has to teach us about such an experience. The first is gratitude.

We do not see the words "thank you" in this text but we see the actions of a grateful heart. Bartimaeus is grateful for Jesus, that he was seen by him and acknowledged by him; that he was taken seriously; that he was healed and given new sight; and finally that he was welcomed by Jesus on his journey to Jerusalem.

This Stewardship season, our theme has been Grateful Hearts. You have probably noticed the colorful paper hearts posted all over the walls of the hallways of the church. Personal gratitude is alive and well here. Diana Butler Bass, in the prologue to her book titled *Gratitude* however, wonders whether "we are failing at communal thanksgiving." She writes that "we are anxious and angry, because we are haunted by nightmares of scarcity, dystopian fears that someone else is taking everything, that there is never enough, and we will never get what we think we deserve. In wealthy societies **that** fear is, in many ways, stoked by real economic inequality and political injustice, resulting in cravings for things we think will fill us, fix us, or make us forget our doubts and pain. This leads to all sorts of addictive behaviors with drugs, sex, alcohol, money, shopping, food, hoarding, and violence. Our fears and disappointments mount, merging with those of our neighbors, and become the seedbed for politics of protection, limits, and rage. This is not a vision of a community of gratitude."

The book goes on to explore the meaning of gratitude and how we can move from individual to communal thanksgiving. How we can together experience the wonder of God's presence for all and find the words and the ways to express our gratitude together. If the Capulets and Montagues had found common cause for gratitude many lives would have been spared. Couldn't that be said of any two families, people groups, political parties or nations today? The way of Jesus invites us to humbly pursue this rather than to pridefully cling to positions which lead to death and destruction.

The second lesson of Bartimaeus is generosity. It may seem that he had nothing to give, for he was a beggar. But Bartimaeus threw off his coat, the place where he collected coins from all who would heed his call for help. He left his way of life to pursue a new dream that was wrapped up in the presence of the one who came to give him new life. Bartimaeus gave himself to Jesus.

Finally, I think Bartimaeus teaches us about faithful discipleship. He joined the group of Jesus' followers as they entered Jerusalem in Mark 11. Shouting with all the others, "Hosanna! Lord save us! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" We do not know where Bartimaeus goes from there. All we know is that he followed Jesus. And that leads us to places of hospitality and welcome as well as to places of danger and pain and even death. But it ultimately leads us to new life. For the end of Mark's story is resurrection.

Do you hear the invitation of the Psalmist? "Taste and See that the Lord is good." Experience the living God and know this grace and love for yourself. For we can be healed by it, transformed by it, and made new by it. May we all respond in faith and join Bartimaeus on the way with Jesus.

To God be the Glory! Amen!