



Regaining Our Sight: Courageous, Outrageous, Persistent, and Clear

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin

The Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost ~ October 25, 2009

Mark 10:46-52

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. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!' Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, 'Son of David, have mercy on me!' 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.' So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. 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.' Jesus said to him, 'Go; your faith has made you well.' Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

One common prayer practice many find to be enriching is called *lectio divina*; "divine" or "holy reading." Sitting in silence, with a selected passage from Scripture, using the imagination of your heart, you enter as a participant, a character, in the narrative – as witness or bystander, as principal actor – one of the disciples perhaps, one of the Pharisees, or as Jesus himself. To enter and engage the text, it helps to envision the details of the environment; to sense the temperature of the day, the dust beneath your feet, the crowd 'round about you; what you're wearing, how you're feeling. Then let the story unfold; it need not proceed precisely as written; in your own prayer, it may take unanticipated turns. (One time in prayer, I saw myself as Zacchaeus, the short fellow who climbed a tree to get a glimpse of Jesus. When Jesus approached and said "come down," unlike Zacchaeus in the story, I refused. I stayed in the tree. And Jesus waited.)

The story of Bartimaeus is a favorite text for this kind of prayer. I'd like to walk through it with you in some detail.

Jesus is traveling on the road to Jerusalem, accompanied by his disciples and a large and growing crowd. Momentum has been gaining, excitement building, anticipating Jesus' confrontation and victory in Jerusalem. The very next verses will tell of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, riding on a colt, the crowd chanting "Hosanna!" in the familiar story of Palm Sunday. It is hot and dry; dusty. The crowd pulsing.

A blind beggar named Bartimaeus sits by the roadside; one of many perhaps. Imagine you are blind Bartimaeus, sitting at the periphery of a crowd. While you retain your physical sight, perhaps, as I am, you are blind to certain things in your life. Close your eyes if you wish; you cannot see. Why might you be sitting by the roadside? How long have you been there? Imagine the sound, the smell, the feel of the crowd. You hear that Jesus is among the crowd. You begin to shout out, "Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me!" People around you tell you to shut up and be quiet. Desperate..., are you desperate? You shout out again, "Jesus, Jesus; have mercy Jesus!"

Jesus stops. The crowd stops. It is quiet. "Call him here." Throwing off his cloak, Bartimaeus leaps up and comes to Jesus. "What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asks him. An odd question it seems; is it not obvious that I am blind? What do you think I want? Help me! Yet Jesus asks it nonetheless, so Bartimaeus answers, "My teacher, let me see again." Jesus says to him, "Go, your faith has made you well." Immediately, he

regained his sight and followed him on the way.

Whenever I enter this text in prayer I find myself in the role of Bartimaeus, struggling with blindness of some sort, asking for help, for healing from God. Let's look more closely.

The blindness: "Teacher, let me see again." "Immediately, he regained his sight." Not always blind, then, but blind now. The sight we once had, have lost, and might recover. What have you lost that you need to recover? Some crippling handicap? Some sense of your self? Has something been diminished within you? In the theological context of the time, blindness was understood as punishment from God for sins committed. So the blindness may be related to those parts of myself about which there may be some shame or avoidance; those places where I think I'm probably beyond repair; "It's just how I am... now." or "I'll never fully heal that wound." Those things that are seemingly intractable. A wise counselor advised that from time to time it is good to go to the edges of our discomfort, to find the boundaries, the places in our sense of self, and in our relationships – especially with those whom we love, or those with whom we are related – go to the places where we think "I don't do that..." And at least look at our blindness.

Now counter that blindness with the determination: shouting out despite the crowds' admonition; willing to do whatever it takes to get help, to get God's attention; willing to break with conformity, create a commotion, cause a mess. So determined, you'll make a great sacrifice: Throwing off his cloak (– a little detail). Not far back down the road, Jesus encountered the rich young man who was unable to relinquish his possessions, which were many. But here, now, is someone who has almost nothing and throws off even the little that he has; the cloak that a beggar wraps 'round for warmth and spreads before him to collect alms. He'll give up everything for this encounter.

Says Jesus: "your faith has made you well." Does the healing come from the power of Jesus alone, or does the healing come in part from the faith Bartimaeus had, that – if he leapt up and shouted, threw off his cloak, named the healing he needed, and believed that Jesus could and would do this – then Jesus makes him well. There are times when Jesus heals even those who are passive, who do not take initiative or plead their own case. But here there is reciprocity, engagement. The initiative lies with Bartimaeus, with us; "What do you want me to do for you?" You must name the healing. You must call out.

And the outcome of the story? "Made well;" the word here – *sozo* in Greek – means both physical health and salvation. He regained his sight and followed Jesus on the way. The outcome is healing. The outcome is salvation. The outcome is also discipleship, following Jesus on the way. In shorthand, we refer to this as a miracle story about healing. But it is identical in form to other stories of Jesus calling the disciples. "Follow me," said he, to Simon and Andrew, who left their nets and followed him on the way. So, too, James and John, sons of Zebedee. Leaving his blindness, regaining the sight he had lost, immediately Bartimaeus joined the crowd and followed Jesus on the way.

Bartimaeus begins stuck in the dust. Prompted by Jesus' approach, the Bartimaeus we see is courageous, outrageous, persistent, and clear.

I want to indulge your prayerful imagination one step further. Imagine, if you will, that we – St. Peter's Church – we are Bartimaeus, sitting here on the side of Pine Street, or Third Street, in the shadow of the great plane trees 'round our churchyard. There is a crowd coming down the street, loud, determined, pulsing. Jesus is with them; Jesus is coming. Here we sit. And what happens next?

Are we blind? How? What sight have we lost? What have we determined, perhaps inadvertently and long ago, is no longer possible for us, something seemingly intractable? Will we cry out for help? If the crowd tells us to shut up and stop making a commotion, will we heed them and retreat? Or will we shout out all the louder? Will we put ourselves on the line, throw off our cloak, risk it all, whatever bit of security we cling too? When Jesus asks, what shall we say that we want him to do for us? What if he were here, asking us, what would we say? And if he healed us of our present blindness, what then? Would we return to our familiar curb, settle back in the dust, and wait for the next parade? Or would we leave what we know, and follow him on the way – into Jerusalem, to confrontation, trial, crucifixion, and new life?

We've passed this way before, you know. And Jesus has too. St. Peter's historians can tell us of many great times of faithfulness, of Christian witness, and courage. And I dare say, they can also tell us that before those steps of faithfulness and courage were taken, in many instances there were long periods of hesitation, of blindness, and intractability. Yet somehow this body leapt to its feet, reached for Christ, named the healing desired, and, once lifted up, followed in faith.

We rejoice that when Bishop William White was the rector here in the late 18th and early 19th century, he ordained the black man and former slave, Absalom Jones, as a priest in the church. But it was not a given that this would

take place; in fact we lived for centuries entrenched in the blindness of slavery. We rejoice that women lead this parish as vestry members, wardens, and priests. But for centuries, we were blind, and lost. Even in our founding, the rector of Christ Church held back, resistant, until the shouts and the courage of parishioners and vestrymen convinced him to allow the building of St. Peter's. Did we immediately reach out and embrace the swarms of immigrants, spilling from the docks, that overcame our neighborhood with their strange languages and customs, or did we initially retreat behind our walls, deaf to their cries, blind to their plight?

What about St. Peter's today? It seems so obvious that blind Bartimaeus should ask Jesus to regain his sight. But blindness can be hard to see; we get caught when we don't know what we don't know. So let me ask it this way: what do we assume is impossible for us, stuck, yet also know that if it were possible, would make all the difference? I'll tell you a couple of things that I see.

What if we were able to relinquish the notion that we, like all Episcopalians, are somehow inherently wired so that it is nigh on impossible for us to talk to somebody else about our faith, about the ways in which we have experienced God's presence in our heart and in our life? What if we could overcome our fear, our sense of decorum and "appropriate-ness" and let our enthusiasm and passion really flare up?

Or what if something miraculously shifted in our lives so that despite all the other things we have to do – being busy, busy, busy (as we are) – we found that it was possible to create time, be still, attend to our soul, just a little each day, with prayer, a little Scripture, some reflection?

And what if we can find a way to take our own individual, congregational passion for improving our neighborhood and city, and what if we could join forces, join hands, with others who share our passion, and work together to shift laws or financial incentives to create justice? And what if our eyes were open and we could really see the ways in which so many of our neighbors are struggling in desperation or loneliness for lack of community? What if we were not afraid?

What if we had a chance to overcome these things? Would Jesus find us courageous, outrageous, persistent, and clear? Would we reach out to God, shout out for help? And if, in so doing, we had to take some risks, would we take them? And if we overcame those things and Jesus said to us, "Your faith has made you well; now come, follow me..." What then? Where to? It is not too late. The hour draws near. Jesus is coming this way once again.