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What Bartimaeus Saw

Mark 10:46-52 & 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

A sermon by William M. Klein

28 October 2018

18 For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. 19 For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." 20 Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? 21 For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. 22 For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, 23 but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, 24 but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. 26 Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. 27 But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; 28 God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, 29 so that no one might boast in the presence of God. 30 He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, 31 in order that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord." (1 Cor. 1:18-31 NRSV)

46 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. 47 When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" 48 Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" 49 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." 50 So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. 51 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." 52 Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way. (Mk. 10:46-52 NRSV)

1

I have never been blind...but I had a cataract removed from each of my eyes. After the first one was removed I was bowled over by colors...particularly things that were bright red. I do not take for granted that many people across this planet go blind for lack of a 15-minute surgery that reclaimed my sightedness.

Mark, the Gospel writer, tells us Bartimaeus was blind. He had not always been blind because he asked Jesus to "let him see **again**." If Bartimaeus were living today an ophthalmologist would likely say his blindness was due to severe cataracts. He did not know what a cataract was. All he knew was that he could no longer see as he once did.

As much as he wanted to see again, he could see many things as a blind man, just not with his eyes. Theologian Howard Thurman tells about an encounter he had with a blind man. The man said to Thurman...

One thing I have learned in my blindness. My contact with people is direct and immediate. How a person looks, what he has on, what his gestures convey, not any of the things by which we bolster our self-respect or convey our meanings makes any difference to me. I cannot see – I can only hear. All of my meaning, all of your integrity or looks – it must be put into words. And the words come without clothing. Sometimes it is dreadful – the exposure that is revealed when a person cannot hide behind his customary defenses.¹

Bartimaeus could not see with his eyes...but I suspect there was a sense in which he could see in the way Howard Thurman's friend could see. And what these two blind men could see ought to give us pause for thought.

For Bartimaeus it so happened a healer-man named Jesus was passing through Jericho, Bartimaeus' hometown. As to story goes, he went to Jesus...and Jesus removed those blinding cataracts, and showed him how to see again.

The last we see of him, he is walking off the page with Jesus. Mark doesn't mention Bartimaeus again. But don't you wonder what happened to him? How far did he walk with Jesus? Did he blend into the crowd that followed him to Jerusalem? Was he with the disciples when the risen Jesus appeared to them? Was he in the gathering of believers on the day of Pentecost? Did he play a role in the formation of the early church? What did his restored eyesight allow him to be and to do? How was the rest of his life a demonstration of the depth of his gratitude?

We can only speculate where the Gospel writers are silent. But speculation can be useful within limits. So let me speculate. Specifically, let me speculate about Bartimaeus in his dotage.

2

I wonder what Bartimaeus might have said to his grandchildren who never knew him as a blind man. The grandchildren knew him as a kindly man who watched everything and spoke little. But when he spoke, everyone listened because he had something to say worth hearing. His ears and eyes had seen a plenty. His eyes could see things others could not see...and it was not because the things were invisible. It was because he cherished the gift, the precious gift, of sight so much that he was attentive.

His attentiveness made him present...always present to those around him...just the way Jesus had been present to him so long ago in Jericho. And that was THE tale his grandchildren loved to hear when they climbed into his lap and said, "Tell us the story again." What do you suppose he said?

Do you suppose he began by saying, "I was blind but Jesus let my eyes work again...then he taught my eyes *how* to see. It never occurred to me he could show my heart and mind how to see, too.

My faith in Jesus began as trust...I confess that is all it was. I trusted Jesus. But trust was enough to make me follow Jesus. My faith is a more mature faith today...but, God willing, I will never forget that faith is first and mostly about trusting the man whose undivided attention healed me."

It happened like this. I was blind. I was not always blind. When I was young I had a disease that caused me to lose my sight. And so I was blind and had been blind for many years. My family and friends helped me. They led me around. I was grateful for their care...but I really wanted to be able to see again.

Then I heard about a traveling healer from Galilee. His name was Jesus. I heard people tell stories about him healing people of leprosy, causing cripple people to walk, and giving sight to blind people. I hoped that one day Jesus would come to Jericho. If he did then maybe he would make me see again.

One morning I was awakened by my sister who said Jesus was outside of Jericho. He was making his way through the city on his way to Jerusalem. The streets were beginning to get crowded with folks hoping to see him.

She helped me get my cloak on and then she led me to the street. When Jesus drew near she did not need to tell me. I could hear him...or rather I could hear people's excitement and I put 2 and 2 together.

When he was not far from me I cried out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" The people standing around me tried to shut me up. "Shush," they said, "he's a busy man. We wish you could see...but Jesus has more important things to do."

Maybe there were more important things...but I figured my blindness was pretty important, too. Plus I was not going to let this opportunity pass by. Put yourself in my shoes. If you believed this was the only chance to have your sight restored, would you sit quietly as the opportunity passed you by? I don't think so. I would hope you would shout at the top of your lungs until Jesus heard you.

That is what I did...and Jesus heard me. I am told Jesus stopped dead in his tracks and turned to see who had cried out to him. He said, "Call him here."

When I reached him, I just stood there and waited for what would happen next. I couldn't see so I did not know what he did...but my sister told me he stood stock-still and gave me his full and undivided attention. He looked at me and saw only me. Even though I could not see him, I felt him looking at me. It was so beautiful...Jesus focusing upon me...for that shining moment Jesus thinking only of me...giving me his full faced, undivided attention.

He said, "What do you want me to do for you?" Thinking about it now I may have asked for world peace...or to remove the sort of hatred that would lead a man to enter a synagogue and kill eleven people gathered for worship. I may have asked that compassion and goodwill and kindness define our public and private discourse. What would you have asked? This is what I asked for...

"Teacher, let me see again." Then Jesus said something that did not make a lot of sense to me then. He said, "Go; your faith has made you well." And instantly I could see again.

But what he said puzzled me. "Your *faith* has made you well." I cannot say I had much faith. The only thing I believed was that Jesus could restore my eyesight. That is what I believed...that is all I believed...and I guess that was enough. That degree of faith was good enough for Jesus...because he let me see again.

Only later did I understand the faith he was talking about is mostly about trusting Jesus. Plenty of people mistake faith for a set of doctrines...a list of the tenets they believe and do not believe. They have faith in a system of beliefs...and forget it is really faith in the man, Jesus.

Jesus looked at me, touched me, and healed me because he loved me. I suppose my trust made a difference. And I know for certain I trusted him...not because I assessed intellectual statements and decided whether they were true or false. I trusted Jesus could make me well. Trust defined my faith. That was the initial opening of my heart...and my eyes.

Does this imply that all the seminaries and divinity schools throughout the world should close their doors, that Christian Education programs should disband, and that people should quit thinking and talking about their faith? Does this mean people should throw away all their books and simply trust in Jesus? In a word, "maybe." I say maybe because if the result of our thinking and theologizing does not lead us to trust God and entrust ourselves to his Son and follow where he leads...then we have missed the point.

4

I have speculated about what a doting Bartimaeus may have said to his eager grandchildren who climbed into his lap to hear his story. I do not suggest my speculations are historical fact. But I think I have been fair to the sense of the text.

It may be that my musings have given you something to think about...because I believe we all come to Jesus with little more than our trust.

Faith begins as trust. I think it ends there, as well. And in between we spend a lifetime thinking about, writing about, talking about, and being about this trusting faith.

It is our willingness to trust that allows us to see...and shapes the way we see. It is gratitude for the gift of spiritual insight that prompts us to follow where Jesus leads. It is trust in him that gives us the courage to give our full-faced attention to the people and the issues facing those people that are presented to us each new day. It is trust in and gratitude to Jesus that compels us to tell his story to our children and grandchildren and to the children we come to know when we keep the nursery and Sunday school when they that climb into our lap to hear about what Jesus did to us.



Lexington Presbyterian Church
120 South Main Street
Lexington, Virginia 24450
www.lexpres.org

Endnotes:

¹ Thurman, Howard. 1981. Meditations of the Heart. Boston: Beacon Press. 133.