

SIGHTLESS BEFORE GOD
Rev. Gary Magarrell October 25, 2009

This week we have one of the many stories of Jesus healing one who wanted to be made whole again. There are so many of these stories and we love them all. We see ourselves following Jesus on the road willing to stop when he stops and to see what Jesus does to assist those in need. Of course we care! But do we really care for the main character of the story?

This story occurs as Jesus has begun the journey which will culminate in arriving in Jerusalem for Passover week and his eventual crucifixion. This trip to Jerusalem affords Jesus many teaching moments for his disciples and those who follow along. These moments often constituted a refresher in discipleship for the 12 men chosen by Jesus, to learn from him and be his ultimate witnesses at the time of his death and resurrection. Remember that the key thing the Apostles were to do after the death and resurrection of Jesus was to be witnesses of what they had seen.

The road to Jericho was often a dangerous stretch of highway known for more than potholes. It was a road notorious for beggars, thieves and other folk which would make us feel uncomfortable if we walked there alone. On this tough crowded road sat the blind man named Bartemaeus.

Let us now go back to the lessons of this story of Bartemaeus. Mary Anderson, a Lutheran pastor in the USA, states that the healing stories in the Gospel never seem to be simply a reversal of physical misfortune. A paralyzed man stands and walks. A man stretches out a withered hand to Jesus and sees it become useful again. A girl who was pronounced dead awakens.

Particularly interesting are the stories of “those who once were blind but now they see.” The connections between seeing and believing are so strong in the Gospel accounts that these miracles worked through Jesus almost always seem more about growing in the faith than taking off dark glasses. Though Bartemaeus was blind to many things, he did clearly see who Jesus was and was also determined to make him stop and notice him and hear his plea for healing.

Seeing “who Jesus is” is the goal of faith and it leads to discipleship. Only the unblind can see where to follow. Physical sight is not required for discipleship, but restoration is. When we say restoration, we speak of being restored to the right relationship with our Creator God through Jesus the Christ. Again and again in history, God works through the miracle, through political forces, through social action and through ordinary living to pick us up from where we have fallen and redirect us along the right pathways.

We enjoy 20/20 hindsight vision, proud of the reformers of the past. Yesterday’s troublemaker is today’s hero. Think of Martin Luther King Jr., the anti-slavery movement, the women’s suffragette movement and other movements deemed out of step years ago and in vogue today. We wonder how people of past days could be so blind to

human rights, slavery, etc. Our question needs to be “in our day, what are those things to which we are blind which future generations will never understand our inaction.”

So, place yourself in this crowd following Jesus on this road. You are caught up in the wonder of it all and enthralled by this man Jesus. You are fairly indifferent to what is going on apart from our group slowly moving forward.

If we were in the front row of the crowd, you and I would have been different, right? We would not be so insensitive to this blind man’s pleas heard over the din of the crowd would we? Some of these front row folk were bold enough to hush the blind man into silence as we surged forward.

Are we that different in our behaviour from this crowd? Think about it. We would be paying close attention to our joys of being with Jesus. We would not pay much attention to the needs of someone on the outside. I would like to think I would not be one of those who told the blind man to be quiet. After all, my mind would be on keeping as close to Jesus as possible. Walking with Jesus was my intent and nothing should get in the way of the walk. Right? What do you think? After all, my life has been so blessed by Jesus. In fact my life has been transformed! There is no doubt about it. Jesus Christ has been good to me. It can’t be wrong to want to be close to Jesus and not miss a minute of our time together.

But why we ask did Jesus even stop in response to this man’s loud and annoying cries when he was in the midst of so many devoted followers? I wonder if we would even have heard the blind man’s persistent cry for help. Perhaps if I was in front and heard this continuous cry, I too would have wanted the blind man to be quiet. Wow! Maybe I am more like the crowd than I thought. I wanted to be with Jesus and Jesus to be with me; I didn’t really want to be with this man by the side of the road. Well, at least not this day!

The truth suddenly dawns: my definition of follower seems to be more “I like to be near you” rather than “I am like you”. Jesus stopped and called blind Bartimaeus to come to him. Because Jesus showed interest, the crowd stopped as well and waited for Jesus to heal this poor man. Now that they had stopped and noticed Bartimaeus, they did hope he would be made well. Having said this, how many had cared before for this poor rejected soul?

When we think about it, each of us has our chance to be near Jesus or be like him. Bartimaeus would have his chance as well. Would he become well and regain his sight and follow in the parade after Jesus or would he be someone who sees those others in need as he was?

If indeed I am to abide in Christ, I need to be prepared to go where Jesus goes. My friendship with Jesus is not equal. We are friends, but He is Lord. He leads, we follow.

We fully intend to offer ourselves to those in need but we are so focused on our own needs. Here we are following Jesus down the road. We are abounding in grace but not

inviting another soul to enjoy the riches of Christ. I am rich and not really caring for the poor. By the time we have thought through what should be our response to someone in need, thinking what our Lord would do, the person in need has disappeared and we stand condemned. I did not even see them go. They were not really in my heart. However, he was not the only one who had moved on. Jesus had also moved on, and I missed him. I am left alone.

In my zeal and quest to follow Jesus more carefully, my failure rate seems to be climbing. I realize I still need his grace. I still need to beg for his mercy, for my sin of neglect is now greater having experienced for myself his wonderful love. That which I have known I should be burning to pass on to others. So why am I quiet; why do I not stop and assist those in need?

We want to say we are like Jesus. We follow him. We genuinely love him. Now however, we need more humility. We need to humbly ask Jesus to take our hand and lead us because we are the blind one. No matter how hard we try, we can not seem to see those that Jesus sees.

We, the disciples of Christ, have vision problems. We sometimes describe our blindness as an inability to see the forest for the trees. More worrisome for us is the inherited blindness of each generation, which so often assumes it is the best generation of all, with no lessons left to learn, only an inheritance to enjoy. This arrogance is the root of our blindness. We still need the miracle of restored sight.

Jesus asks Bartimaeus such an obvious question: “What do you want me to do for you?” Of course he wanted his sight back but he also wanted to join a community of believers following Christ. His sight restored, he could take his place in the crowd and follow on his own.

Bartimaeus is not the only blind man in this story. The disciples have blind spots. After all they dismissed Bartimaeus and urged him to be quiet and to stay where he was on the edge of life. This story is a call for insiders, and we can include ourselves in this term insiders, to not forget that following Jesus means a radical change in priorities. It would have saved time by not stopping to talk to this man and Jesus could have arrived at his destination sooner. However, in some ways, the distraction of the blind man becomes the destination. The interruption becomes the opportunity to follow the way of Jesus. The interruption and the interaction between Jesus and Bartimaeus is where we see God’s Kingdom come on earth.

“I want to see again.” That is not just the cry, the plea, the prayer of the blind man. It is the plea of anyone who has lost their way, their purpose. It is the cry of anyone who has lost hope. We know the road to more possessions, greater monetary success and fame leads to a dead end. We want more – to find deeper meaning in our life and in our place before God.

So though we may feel we now have 20/20 vision, we still have blind spots. Some of these may be the isms of society: racism, ageism, sexism for example. We see people different to ourselves as odd, foreign, suspicious or not up to our standards. We rape the environment in our search for an even richer life style.

Like the disciple on the way with Jesus, we have blind spots – we are after all human. The blinders we wear we do not want to lose though we do want to embrace the Way of Jesus.

This is our dilemma in life. We constrain ourselves by our inability to move away from the safety of what we know. Yet Christ calls us to a new way, one that calls us to love fully and experience fully relationship with one another and with God.

In our reading from the last chapter of the Book of Job, we read of Job finally realizing God's love is all he needs. He also learns that we are to follow our loving God, not second guessing God, but taking his Lordship seriously and joyfully. In that mode, we experience the fullness of life and at last we too can see.