

“Seeing Beyond Our Fortresses”

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Psalm 34:1-8

Mark 10:17-31

I recently heard a story about two blind men who were both Christians. They were discussing together the story of the healing of blind Bartimaeus. One of the blind men said, “It is because of *this* story that I became a Christian! The fact that Jesus stopped in his path to touch and heal a man, just like me, shows me that Jesus loves and cares for people who have my experience.”

The other blind Christian responded, “I know that story, but that story never would have convinced me to become a Christian.”

“Why ever not?” asked the first man.

“Because, I have prayed and prayed to God, through Jesus, to heal me of my blindness, and God has not come through like was Bartimaeus’ experience.”

“Then why are you a Christian, then?” asked the first man.

“I am a Christian,” the second man replied, “because when I read the words Jesus spoke from the cross, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ I trust *that* Jesus knows and cares for my soul.”¹

I wonder what it was that made Bartimaeus turn to Jesus to begin with. You see, Jesus and his band of disciples were on the way out of Jericho when they passed Bartimaeus. Bartimaeus, the scripture says, was not **on** the road, but was sitting **beside** the road. *And though he could not even see Jesus*, Bartimaeus knew he wanted some part in what Jesus was doing.

Have you ever felt like you were sitting on the sidelines when you knew the important action was on the road, in the court, or somewhere where you were not? Have you yearned, longed for, reached for a way to be part of the action? Did you find your way in?

¹ Phyllis Tickle, a scholar of Hebrew Bible, told this story at a lecture I attended at Union Theological Seminary on Oct. 26, 2018.

I have been following the caravan of 5,000 people traveling from Central America through Mexico, on their way to the US border. Some of the pictures I have seen show parents holding young children as they travel by foot. I understand how a young child's weight gets exponentially heavier with each ten-minute interval of being held. I also understand the weight a parent feels to keep their child safe. So, when I see these parents carrying their children in this caravan, I wonder first how tired their arms must be feeling. And then I wonder what they are fleeing-- because to bring a child on a journey like this, which to me seems neither comfortable nor safe, they must be fleeing something truly frightening. Like Bartimaeus, they are reaching for something and though the odds seem impossible, they have remarkable faith in what could be.

Let's look more closely at Bartimaeus. Even though he was a beggar, sitting by the roadside, everyone in the crowd knew whose family *he* belonged to. The bible even says it twice-- his name, Bartimaeus, literally means Timaeus' son. And then the scripture repeats it: Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus. So he was no nameless beggar, like any of the dozens of people you may some of you have encountered on your commute to work in the city, asking for food or money-- or maybe you *have* come to know these neighbors' names, too.

No, although we don't see the father Timaeus, we know that Bartimaeus should have been connected to him. Is the father absent while his son, blind and begging, sits by the roadside because he is embarrassed? It certainly seems that Bartimaeus embarrasses the crowd-- so much so that when he began to shout out to Jesus, they shush him, sternly ordering him to be quiet. Perhaps they knew their scripture well: after all, Leviticus 21 forbids blind people from approaching the altar of the Lord.

I wonder if the father, Timaeus, was a well-known figure in the community, but bore a societal and perhaps religious shame for having a son with a disability. After all, so much theology then and now repeats what the Psalm of the day says: "Seek the Lord, God will answer you and deliver you from your fears. Look to God and be radiant; your face shall never be ashamed. Cry to the Lord and God will hear you and save you from every trouble. Fear the Lord and God will encamp Godself around you and deliver you."

So if God is really like that, then what can we say of Timaeus that he could have a blind son? To make room for Bartimaeus in that intersection of history and culture would be to say that either God failed in God's promises, or that Timaeus did not give to God the faithfulness that would allow for the blessings of a prosperous life and family. An embarrassment.

A few years ago, during the Broadway performance of *The King and I*, during an intense whipping scene in the second act, a child began yelping in the audience. As Kelvin Moon Loh, an actor on the stage during that moment describes, “It sounded like terror. His voice pierced the theater. The audience started to rally against the mother and her child to be removed.” The actor continued describing what happened, “I heard murmurs of ‘why would you bring a child like that to the theater?’. This is wrong. Plainly wrong. Because what you didn’t see was a mother desperately trying to do just that. But her son was not compliant. What they didn’t see was a mother desperately pleading with her child as he gripped the railing refusing- yelping more out of defiance. I could not look away. I wanted to scream and stop the show and say- “EVERYONE RELAX. SHE IS TRYING. CAN YOU NOT SEE THAT SHE IS TRYING???!!!!!”

This actor wrote on his Facebook page about that excruciating experience-- not because the boy troubled the scene, but because the audience, in their entitlement, couldn’t figure out how to make space for the boy and his mom. The actor wrote, “When did we as theater people, performers and audience members become so concerned with our own experience that we lose compassion for others? The theater to me has always been a way to examine/dissect the human experience and present it back to ourselves. Today, something very real was happening in the seats and, yes, it interrupted the fantasy that was supposed to be this matinee but ultimately theater is created to bring people together, not just for entertainment, but to enhance our lives when we walk out the door again.”²

Just as the autistic body and mannerisms of a young boy troubled the audience at a Broadway play, so Bartimaeus in his blindness troubled not only the crowd of those following Jesus but also the biblical tradition that says that good works equal God’s favor.

No doubt God loves our good works. The great reformer Martin Luther made it clear in the 95 theses he supposedly nailed to the church door in Wittenberg, copies of which quickly spread through Europe thanks to the new technology of the printing press, that “he who sees a needy man and passes him by, yet gives his money for indulgences, does not buy papal indulgences but **God’s wrath**.”³ From Martin Luther’s point of view,

² “Broadway star pens open letter after boy with autism interrupts show” on *Autism Speaks* Website, www.autismspeaks.org, September 25, 2015

³ This is the 45th line of Luther’s *95 Theses* (<http://www.luther.de/en/95thesen.html>)

God is more pleased by right actions than purchasing God's favor through buying forgiveness certificates, called indulgences, offered by the pope in the 16th century.

But Luther, who was a monk before his part in the Reformation took fire, spent hours upon hours in his cell punishing himself before God for *not* being good enough. He would confess every sin he could think of possibly committing, and then he would confess more, never able to see himself as worthy before God. And then one day it dawned on him that God's *grace* is what makes us good, and that grace is not something that we can earn.

The late author Phyllis Tickle, in her book *The Great Emergence*, notes that the impactful moment of Luther's 95 Theses could not have happened without many other shifts: Copernicus supposing that the sun, not the earth, is the center of the universe; the advent of the printing press; Columbus' fateful westward sail (he didn't fall off the edge of a flat earth), and the beginnings of capitalism. ⁴

The opening hymn I chose to go with today's worship service progress from Martin Luther's "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." The fourth verse of the hymn speaks to the importance of scripture, "That word above all earthly powers." Luther, along with Reformers that came shortly after him such as John Calvin, spoke of *sola scriptura*-- scripture alone as the authority in which Christians should trust. Having seen the authorities in human church leadership, especially in that of the pope, fail the faith, the great reformers held up scripture as the infallible way that we can understand God's movement in our lives. In a sense, for the Reformers, scripture is the fortress in which we can experience God. If you picture a fortress, you may think of stone walls that protect whoever is inside. You think of militarism, and a structure that allows you to be defended, but because it has narrow windows from which you can see and attack the enemy, a fortress also offers opportunity for offense as well.

I suspect we fail Jesus when we use the faith as a fortress-- a place from which we can attack others, and a place where we can retreat and hide when we are fearful.

I think again of the caravan heading towards this country through Mexico. I think of the parent whose tired arms are carrying a child. I wonder if, instead of using our faith as a fortress, we could instead see the church as the arms that hold a vulnerable child, knowing that it could in fact be an incarnation of the Christ child. As a parent who knows how quickly a young child can get heavy in your arms, it occurs to me that it is

⁴ Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why* chapter 3: "The Great Reformation: A Prequel to Emergence" Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2012

very likely that the people I see in these pictures holding a child are not in fact the child's parents. They are caring individuals, who volunteer to take a turn to hold the child and to keep the child safe, so that the child's care and safety does not fall on one person alone. This seems to be the spirit of the caravan. I read yesterday that along the caravan's journey, people have shown up with stew and tortillas, and comfort stations that provide healing for blistered and aching feet. Though many of them live in poverty as well, they offer what they can to give healing to those more vulnerable than themselves. These also are the arms that hold Jesus.

Are our arms strong enough to hold Jesus through these times? These are times when even a sanctuary does not feel like a space safe from the violence that has become daily headlines. We join our Jewish siblings in faith in lament for the persecution that was experienced in Pittsburgh yesterday when a gunman entered a Jewish sanctuary-- a crime that did not only impact those who knew and loved the victims, but also had echoes of the violent persecution of Jews that has happened throughout history.

Bartimaeus could not see Jesus, but he knew he wanted some part in what Jesus was doing. The placement of this story in Mark comes after several stories in which people question Jesus. These are people who had sight, but in fact are blind to what Jesus was trying to do, whether they were trying to trap Jesus by using scripture as a weapon, or using Roman law as a weapon that he would break. While Bartimaeus literally could not see, he knew he was beholding the Christ. He reached beyond the fortress of his blindness and joined Jesus' procession towards what would come next. When we reach out our arms for Jesus, who knows how our lives, our church, and our world might next be re-formed.

We are part of a confessional church. That means we participate in the affirmations of faith that have helped Christians before us hold the faith. Many of the historical confessions of the Presbyterian Church (USA) come from Europe, where the fires of the Reformation happened. But we are indeed a global church, and the arms that have held Jesus stretch far beyond the borders of our own countries and languages. The confession we will speak today comes from the 24th General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in Accra, Ghana. Let us stand and say what we believe.