

“In a New Light”

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Psalm 126

Mark 10:46-52

How many of you in the past week or so have had to swap out your summer clothes for your winter clothes? I did that last week, trudging up to the attic and pulling down my winter coat and sweaters, and with more than a little sadness, putting away my bathing suits and shorts. Each season I do this, I find things that no longer fit or are no longer useful, and I make a little pile so I can give them away.

In her book, *The Great Emergence*, author Phyllis Tickle said that every 500 years— give or take a few— the church has a big rummage sale. It sorts through its attic of ideas and decides what it will dispose of, and what it will keep, in order to respond faithfully to how the Spirit’s call into the next era.

The coming of Jesus ushered in sweeping changes to Jewish thought. Some of Jesus’ ideas were already in discussion and debate in Judaism before Jesus came. But his life, death, and resurrection brought a profound experience of his message of love neighbor and loving God, and of overturning the powers of death, that the world would never be the same after that.

Nearly 500 years later, in 476 CE, the Roman Empire ended. Communication and trade systems collapsed. Formal education no longer was available for ordinary citizens. Europe entered the Dark Ages. At the same time, monastic communities started to emerge, teaching practices of spiritual renewal such as meditation and becoming places of education when those were not available elsewhere. These monastic communities also tended the poor and sick, offering a care that was not otherwise available to most people.

In 1054, about another 500 years later, the Great Schism split the church, the Eastern or Orthodox Church separated itself from the Roman Church.

Then in 1517, Martin Luther presented his 95 Theses to the church in Wittenburg. He inspired more reformers, and with the birth of the printing press, these ideas moved like wildfire to change the church. Luther began with a critique of the practice of indulgences— that is, selling stamps of forgiveness for sin, to help guarantee a space for you— or even your loved one— into heaven. You will see the five solas- Grace Alone, Scripture Alone, Christ Alone, Glory of God Alone, and Faith Alone reflected in the hymn choices today. Luther taught that these alone are what are needed to experience God’s salvation. Bartimaeus gives us an example today of what faith alone can do.

We always think of his story as the moment his eyes were opened by Jesus— as if Bartimaeus was the one who needed fixing. But the truth is, Bartimaeus’ faith opened the eyes of those around him, and caused them to see Jesus in a new light, and to consider even their own faith in a new light.

This story often gets celebrated as a story of healing. It often gets announced as evidence of how powerful and kind Jesus is. And I agree; Jesus was and is both powerful and kind. But let’s consider this time that the real teacher in the story is Bartimaeus-- not Jesus.

Persons with disabilities often find their voices and even their bodies pushed to the margins of society. That’s certainly where we find Bartimaeus at the beginning of the gospel passage; he is “by the roadside” somewhere between Jericho and Jerusalem. The Greek describes Bartimaeus literally as “*by the way*”-- as if he was an afterthought or a footnote. And that’s how everyone else was used to treating him-- passing him by in their comings and goings without noticing, or maybe tossing a coin into his cloak if they were feeling generous that day.

That’s just how things went. That is, until Bartimaeus demonstrated his faith in Jesus.

Have mercy on me! Bartimaeus’ cry for mercy turned the head of Jesus, demanding his attention. It was a demonstration of faith and trust in what Jesus offers.

When Bartimaeus shouted, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” his demands for attention clearly *cost* something to the disciples and the large crowd surrounding Jesus, and it seems they fear it will cost something even more to Jesus. They sternly order him to be quiet. I wonder, are they afraid this man’s demands for mercy will cost them their own moment as the focus of Jesus’ mercy? Do they worry that Jesus associating with a blind beggar will somehow diminish his authority? Do they worry-- as some people have been prone to think with people who are homeless, mentally ill, physically disabled, or sick with chronic illness, that somehow Bartimaeus’ vulnerability will somehow infect them, too? Or, maybe the blind beggar’s demands would cost their standing in the status quo. As Walter Brueggemann, a scholar of the Hebrew Bible, states,

“The people’s effort to silence the blind beggar reflects their wish to *keep* him a beggar-- dependent and blind. If the man were healed, if he were to shake off his powerlessness, he would begin to demand food and care... It might mean that someone else would lose status. The blind beggar’s silence, on the other hand, would ensure that the status quo would be maintained.”¹

To Bartimaeus, the crowd’s efforts to hush him did not stop his desire to reach out to Jesus. He simply cried out even more loudly.

But Jesus stood still. In the face of growing anxiety and jockeying over who deserves mercy, Jesus’ stillness redirects the energy of the crowd. This is a practice I would like to cultivate in my life:

To slow down. To be still. To listen.

Too often, I know I follow the energy of other people’s anxiety rather than find a way to redirect it. *Slow down. Be still. Listen.*

Then Jesus told the crowd, “Call him here!”

In an instant, the crowd’s anxieties *are* redirected. Instead of expending lots of energy trying to shush Bartimaeus and put him back in the margins where they thought he belonged, their attention has shifted. They are interested and ready

¹ Walter Brueggemann, “Theological Education: Healing the Blind Beggar,,” *The Christian Century* (February 5, 1986) p. 114.

to see what will happen between Jesus and Bartimaeus. They are suddenly interested in showing Bartimaeus mercy. "Take heart. Get up. He is calling you." the crowd tells Bartimaeus.

I read this story in a bible study workshop with teenagers years ago. One of their comments which I appreciated and took note of came from the teenager who said this: "I don't like how it sounds when the disciples are all nice all of the sudden. It feels like when you do something in middle school and everyone says, 'Oh, that is so nasty!' but then a popular kid does the same thing, and then everyone wants to do that thing, too."

I'm not sure it would be accurate to call Jesus the popular kid, considering how things ended up for him: betrayed, abandoned, in court, then on the cross. Maybe in Bartimaeus' disability, Jesus saw a future vision of himself and his own vulnerability. My seminary professor for Sociology of Religion, Dr. Nancy Eiesland, lived with a lifetime disability that kept her either walking with a cane or in a wheelchair. She liked to call people without disabilities the "temporarily able-bodied." Whatever it was Jesus saw in Bartimaeus, it became *worth* the cost of Jesus's mercy. But instead of looking at Bartimaeus and making the assumption of what Bartimaeus wanted or needed, Jesus simply asked Bartimaeus: "What do you want me to do for you?"

At this point, Bartimaeus has changed positions, from being hunched over, a by-the-way beggar, to one who throws off his cloak, springs up to meet Jesus, and asks him, "*My teacher, let me see again.*"

Remember the rich man, whose story we read a couple weeks ago in worship? He could not be compelled to part with his possessions, as Jesus suggested, and walked away very distressed. Bartimaeus, on the other hand, flung off his cloak to approach Jesus! I'm not sure what he wore beneath that cloak, if anything, but nothing mattered to Bartimaeus in that moment except for the chance to connect with Jesus. Can you imagine having a faith like that? When *nothing* you possess will get in the way of connection with Christ?

Jesus then told Bartimaeus, "Go, your faith has made you well." The Greek term Jesus uses for wellness here-- *sezoken*-- is the same word for salvation. Your faith has saved you.

However, the passage speaks nothing of salvation of the soul. Bartimaeus' salvation is not something to enjoy in heaven, a reward to enjoy after he leaves this suffering life. Jesus meant his salvation to be lived out and enjoyed in this *present* life. Jesus announced Bartimaeus' salvation, and *then* Bartimaeus regained his sight. It seems as if Bartimaeus' seeking and asking made him whole, well, and saved, rather than Jesus' healing.

How do we find such faith and trust today? I can barely make it to November 5th. What important things will our faith teach us on how to live in the world for these present times?

It's been a little more than 500 years since the Protestant Reformation and the invention of the printing press. It's time for a new rummage sale. Consider how we consume news and information today- it is at the tip of our fingertips, and everyone is a potential expert. At the same time, money plays a huge role in who gets to share the news— just look at how oligarchs like Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos shape the ways we consume news. How can we learn from each other about the good news of who God is when we cannot even agree on which news source we can trust?

When the way is not clear, we do best by turning our gaze away from what glows with money and power, in order to show our mercy to those who are on the sidelines, sitting *by* the roadside, like Bartimaeus was. Who has been left and forgotten? Who are the vulnerable? Chances are that if we open our eyes to see the salvation that God calls forth in their lives, and work to make way for the unfolding of liberation in their stories, we will find liberation or salvation for ourselves, too. Like Bartimaeus, our eyes will be opened, and we will see in a new light.

The comedian Gracie Allen once said, "Do not put a period where God put a comma." One thing we can count on in an uncertain world is that we will all be changed, we will all be transformed. This may sound like bad news, especially for those who benefit from the status quo. But remember, whatever happens in the next two weeks, God has not written the final chapter with *our* story. Jesus is not done ushering forward liberation among us, and through us, in this lifetime. Will we have the faith to live it, and to share it?

