

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

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Proper 25B 2009

In the name of our one living God, who creates abundantly, loves extravagantly, and sustains eternally: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

In today's gospel lesson, Jesus, again through his words and the action of healing, teaches us that true vision - as opposed to mere sight - involves the heart as much as the eyes and brain. Here, he is leaving the city of Jericho and a large crowd follows him out of town. Jericho is about 20 miles from Jerusalem - a day's hike. Jesus is near the end of his teaching ministry and heads to Jerusalem and to the death he has predicted three times to his disciples.

Jesus must have had a lot on his mind in those moments. From the periphery comes a cry from a blind beggar sitting on the roadside. "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me," he cries out. Many in the crowd sternly ordered him to be quiet. They had better and more important things to do. They were marching to victory behind Jesus, couldn't that fool beggar see that? Like the twelve, the crowd believed the Messiah was going to immediately overthrow the Romans and their lackeys. Again he cries out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Those people in the crowd must have been thinking, "God, this one's a pest. Doesn't he know his place?" Let's face it, blind beggars were a dime a dozen in those days, they were hardly worth noticing. Having lived and worked in New York City for over 30 years, I can relate to that. I thought as I was preparing today's sermon,

“How many down and out people did I look right through and did not see in those 30 years?”

But Jesus stopped in his tracks. “Call him here”, he commanded. “Take heart, “the bystanders say, “He is calling you.” I’ll say it again, because those words are important; “He is calling you.” Bartimaeus threw off his cloak, sprang up and went to Jesus. Now a beggar’s cloak was what he spread out before him to collect the coins or food thrown his way. Casting off his cloak was not just disposing of a garment – it was leaving behind a whole way of life. How’s that for faith – a blind beggar throwing away his only means of survival!

Then Jesus asks blind Bartimaeus a question: “What do you want me to do for you?” Does that question sound familiar? It is the exact same words Jesus asked James and John in last week’s gospel lesson. Thinking they knew what God was about, they asked Jesus to make them his two top stewards when he came into his glory. They didn’t get it. They thought of earthly glory and wanted to be first in line when the goodies got passed out. Bartimaeus answers, “My teacher, let me see again.” Jesus answers, “Go: your faith has made you well.”

I really like Bartimaeus. First of all, he is tenacious. When he gets shouted down by the crowd who usually ignores him, if not revile him, he shouts out again – this time even louder. He is not about to be silenced and kept on the fringes. He is determined to break through that wall that renders him invisible. Despite his condition, he will not let go of his humanity. Jesus told parables about people like him and the lesson was God responds to these people.

Bartimaeus was daring. He calls aloud giving Jesus the title of “Son of David” At that time, this was the Messianic title of the one whom God would send as foretold by Isaiah – the one who would give sight to the blind and free the captives. However, that kind of talk could easily get one in trouble with the Temple and Rome. Bartimaeus’ belief in God’s promise exceeded his fear.

Bartimaeus saw enough in Jesus and in his own situation, that he could name his true need. That’s important. We have to do the work to see beyond the present and thus know what we truly need. He could have asked for a twenty – money to get by on. But he had done his work and he knew what he needed, so he asked big – “Rabbouni, I want to see again.” I don’t know what Bartimaeus felt all those days and years sitting beside the road, being ignored or jeered, wondering if he would get enough to eat that day. He must have been close to despair. Not just of the situation, but with the idea that it would never change. His only recourse was faith – faith that with God all things are possible; faith that God saw him sitting by the side of that road; faith that God was with him and would respond. Faith is a necessity when the only alternative is despair.

Bartimaeus shows us that out of faith comes hope. It was hope that gave him the strength to raise his voice through that wall of silence and shame that surrounded him. It was hope that allowed him to give voice to what he needed and he asked big.

This is the last teaching in Mark about discipleship. Jesus called him and healed him and then told him to go. But Bartimaeus instead followed Jesus to Jerusalem. Blind Bartimaeus saw when the crowds couldn’t. He asked Jesus for mercy and sight and he got both. God’s grace is there but we need faith and hope to ask and receive. Bar-

timaeus was able to do what the rich young man was unable to do – to let go and be freed of what was holding him down.

The story of Bartimaeus teaches us that discipleship is about transformation. It is about letting God’s grace work in our lives – it changes everything and makes all things new.

Mark Twain once said, “You cannot depend on your eyes when your imagination is out of focus.” Vision takes faith and hope as well as eyes.

Amen