

Reformation Sunday  
October 25, 2015

**"WHAT WE DON'T WANT TO SEE"**

*by Mary Anne Biggs*

Hebrews 7:23-28 ~ Mark 10:46-52

We take them for granted, but we depend on our eyes for so much. I suppose all of us deal with some handicap ... some personal limitation as we negotiate life ... but I have always admired people who overcome a visual challenge. We had God's visual aid for handling blindness with abiding grace when the Rev. Mark Schowalter led worship this summer. He has developed other means of perception ... hearing, taste, and touch. He has found other ways of learning and movement which do not depend on sight. He will tell you that because of what it has taught him, that he is almost thankful for his blindness. Almost. He is certainly to be admired, but what of those who choose to be blind?

Because of his blindness Bartimaeus of Jericho was reduced to begging. In that day there were no social supports. Without family he was on his own and at the mercy of others. Ironically, his blindness made him invisible to most people. They no longer saw him. In fact, we don't even know his real name to this day. "Bar-timaeus" is an Aramaic phrase which literally means, "Son of Timaeus." You know how it is with beggars and panhandlers and the poor. We don't want to know their names. We don't want to see their plight. We prefer to look away. It hits too close to home. We feel sad for them, maybe frightened for ourselves. "What if that happened to me?" we think, "There but for the grace of God, go I," but that doesn't necessarily lead us to offer grace ... to be the grace of God with even a humanizing "hello." Or we judge them as a way to protect ourselves. We feel angry with them. We think, "Why don't you get a job? Do something useful." And to be sure, we don't trust them. If we give them a handout, they'll probably just spend it on alcohol or drugs. Or, we feel their hopelessness and helplessness ourselves. What can we do that will really make a difference? And we can't help every person in the world who has need. So it's human, it's normal, to turn a blind eye ... to turn a deaf ear ... to walk past and ignore them ... or hope the light will change so we don't have to say "no" directly.

But on this day the Son of Timaeus makes a nuisance of himself. He hears that Jesus of Nazareth is passing by. He has heard of this Jesus before ... the things he is saying ... the wonders he is doing. It would be easy enough for the blind man to sit quietly and continue his life as a beggar. Day after day, to sit with his cloak in front of him to receive the loose change of charitable souls who stroll by, getting their attention with a "good day to you, sir," or a "can you help a little today, ma'am," ... listening to the occasional clink of one coin upon another tossed upon his cloak, enough to get by. Nothing more is expected of him. What can he do? He is blind. How easy it is for us to live with our excuses ... to become comfortable with being the victim of circumstances instead of taking responsibility to change what makes us miserable. But for the Son of Timaeus, life has become unbearable. You know how that happens. One day, you

just say "That's it. I've had enough." And you change because not changing is finally intolerable. You change because changing yourself is the only way you can change the situation.

The blind man cries out. He shouts. He screams above the crowd: "Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me!" Not once, but again and again. "Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me! Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me! It's irritating. It's embarrassing. Before the president visits or some international conference comes to town, most cities move the beggars to where they won't be seen ... arrest the worst ... give an extra hand out to the rest to get them out of sight for a few days. The son of Timaeus won't be moved. He is downright obnoxious. They try to shush him. He keeps right on being rude. They try to silence him. They want him to be invisible again so they can attend to their honored guest ... maybe get his attention for themselves. They're like most of us who were raised in the South ... being polite is more important than being honest. But the Son of Timaeus will not hush up.

So many things are happening here. On the one hand, we see the many against the one. Whenever victims of abuse complain ... the abusive spouse or parent or society will always blame them for causing the trouble and try to silence them ... or even use their cries as opportunity for further abuse. To be sure, lone voices crying out can occasionally be wrong. But always listen to the lone individual confronting the crowd. They get branded as troublemakers, but sometimes, they are the truth-tellers ... challenging the status quo. Bertrand Russell said, "Every great idea starts out as a blasphemy," and he was right. They called Martin Luther a blasphemer. They said the same about Martin Luther King. And of course, they called Jesus a blasphemer, too. Our greatest prophets have always been called heretics in their own time. They speak the truth that no one wants to hear. They point to the problems that no one wants to see because denial is easier than change. So we ignore these truth-tellers and hope that they'll go away. And if they don't go away we try to silence them.

What is the stark truth that the Son of Timaeus is shouting? It is his prayer ... its radical content ... that Jesus, Son of David ... is the source of the mercy he needs ... the mercy we need ... the mercy all humanity needs. It is the truth that this prayer is ultimately the prayer each of us is reduced to, however handsome, however successful, however self-sufficient we may think ourselves. If we don't see it now ... one day we will ... facing our own foolishness ... facing our own brokenness ... facing our own mortality ... finally we will have no other prayer than, "Lord, have mercy on me." As the old song says, "Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose," and the blind man is free to cry out his truth in spite of the shushing denials of the crowd.

See this, too ... Jesus stops to listen. The text is very pointed about that. It says: "Jesus stood still." Jesus stopped in his tracks. Jesus heard the honest cry of the desperate person that no one else wanted to hear. I think God always hears every prayer of every person because surely God hears everything we say and think. That means God is even listening to us when we don't realize we are praying ... when our prayers take the form of cries or longings ... of hopes and dreams ... of joys and sorrows ... and groanings which cannot be uttered. God is always more ready to listen than we are to pray. But this is an honest and humble prayer, and Jesus hears it ... Jesus responds.

"Call him here," Jesus says. They tell the Son of Timaeus, "Take heart, get up; he is calling you. This is your lucky day. You're the one he wants to see." We are reminded of the story of Zacchaeus in Luke, also a citizen of Jericho, whom Jesus called down from the sycamore tree. Or the woman with a hemorrhage who touched the hem of Jesus' robe in a crowd so pressing that they laughed when Jesus said, "Who touched me?" Jesus always noticed the people who were hanging on the margins just as much as the leaders at the center. If you are here today and feeling unnoticed, unimportant, or forgotten by God, listen to this ... Jesus sees you, too. Jesus hears your prayers and sees your tears as much as those of the President's or the Pope's. "Take heart, get up; he is calling you."

The Son of Timaeus throws off his cloak. Is it an act of faith? Does he know he will no longer need it for gathering coins? He comes to Jesus, and Jesus asks him, "What do you want me to do for you?" This is the same exact question, word for word, that Jesus asked James and John not long before. In last week's Gospel James and John asked Jesus to make them great ... to let them sit at his right and left hand ... in the position of honor. Jesus heard their selfish prayer and he said, "No." But here, the blind man makes a courageous request: "My teacher, let me see again." And Jesus opens his eyes!

We have to wonder, who is really blind here, and who can really see? And that is Mark's whole point ... to show us the spiritual blindness all around Jesus. *It is the blind man* who sees that Jesus has the power to make him whole. But the religious leaders and gatekeepers see only a threat to their authority. *It is the blind man* who sees that Jesus can give him sight and teach him truth. But the status seeking disciples see only someone who can give them power. Mark is showing us this irony ... Jesus heals a blind man who wants to see, but all these other people around Jesus ... who have perfectly good eyes ... cannot see ... they refuse to see who he is ... what he is about ... or even the truth about themselves.

What is it we don't want to see? We have this tendency to ignore our own faults, to not even see they exist. That is why the reformers said the church must constantly look at itself with a critical eye to see where we have wandered away from the gospel. The Reformation wasn't supposed to be one moment in history, but a continuing way of life in the church ... because we choose to be blind sometimes. For instance, we don't want to see how oppressive and soul stifling American consumerism is, or how deeply we ourselves are trapped in it. Perhaps you've heard about crowds spending the night outside of Apple Stores to get the newest gizmos. When I see that, I always think about people at the food pantry who try to be first in line because they are hungry. What are the folks outside the Apple Store so hungry for? And I try to imagine a time when people might be spiritually starved enough to stand in line all night to get a seat in church. But of course, in about any church in the land, you can come late ... it's okay ... there'll still be plenty of seats. I don't think we are always wrong or that America is evil, but I do believe we don't want to see what our materialism does to other nations ... what life is like for the poor in our own land. We don't want to see our own sin while we are judging the sins of others. It's only human nature, we think the other guy is blind and only we can see ... but each of us has some area where we do not see because we do not want to see ... and we will often be angry with anyone who tries to show us. We don't want to see the truth about ourselves, but when we do, we can become like Bartimaeus, we can throw ourselves entirely upon the grace of God.

And I think sometimes, we also don't want to see how beautiful life is ... how wonderful we are ... how good it is to be alive and to be surrounded by people who care about us. Oh, yes, it is not just the awful things about ourselves that we don't want to see. We don't want to see the wonderful things, either ... the things we are capable of doing ... the things we have a knack for doing well ... the things about ourselves that are decent and right and good. And ... I think this is so ... we don't really stop and look at each other and see how alive and beautiful the other person is. A few years ago I attended a workshop on race where we had to sit across from a person of a different race and just look into each other's eyes for five minutes without speaking. It was uncomfortable. I hated it, but I came home and tried it on our deacons at our annual deacons' retreat. They hated it, too! Why is it we don't want to look, I mean really look at another person and behold the life in him ... notice the pain she feels ... see the hope and dreams and heart of another?

And so we sit at the side of the road with our eyes closed, begging for life when life is right there in our reach. We blind ourselves to the bad news and hard truths that we're not nearly so good as we want to think. We close our eyes to the good news that God is with us ... and that we are beautiful ... and that we can do better. We turn a blind eye and a deaf ear to people who need us ... to each other ... because we just don't want to see what might make us change our ways ... change our opinions ... change our plans. Seeing takes courage. Seeing takes character. Seeing the truth will change you and change is always hard. But is it really better to remain blind?

Well, one day, a long time ago, this blind man, the son of Timaeus, had had about enough. He was tired of the darkness ... tired of begging ... tired of missing out on the fullness and richness of life. So he cried out to Jesus, "Jesus, Son of David have mercy on me." And Jesus heard him. "What is it you want me to do for you?" Jesus asked. The man said, "Teacher, let me see again." And Jesus opened his eyes so he could see. He could see. What is it you want Jesus to do for you today as he passes through? Do you want to see the truth he has to show you? Do you want to see yourself as you really are? Do you want to see what you might be? Do you want to see? Do you really want to see? May we pray?

Lord, we have sight, but we do not see. We need insight, too. Give us the courage to see the truth ... the grace to see the good ... the love to see each other. Open our eyes, awaken us to the light, and then, like the Son of Timaeus, we'll rise up and follow you. Amen.