

Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time
A Celebration of Reformation Heritage
JOB 42:1-6, 10-17
PSALM 34:1-8
HEBREWS 7:23-28
MARK 10:46-52
October 27, 2024

Seeing Is As Seeing Does!

Invisible! Back in the day, in the ancient world, to be blind was to be invisible. Unless you happened to have a caring family member, a protector, your very existence was predetermined, your lot in life pigeon-holed. It was what it was! For those who could not see, most folks did not see them. In fact, the vast majority chose not to see them, did not want to see them! To some, if not a large degree, the blind were shunned, outcasts, because of their perceived lowly status, their low estate, a miserable condition that was indeed a sign of God's disdain, displeasure, and disgust. The rank and file simply chose to look the other way! How convenient! First of all, blind people, by their very nature, were obviously damned with the indelible mark of a divine curse, having surely committed an egregious sin of either commission or, perhaps worse, of an unbeknownst, unidentifiable, omission. See the story of the blind man in the ninth chapter of the Gospel of John for a full description of that nonsensical theology, what was, however, a traditional Israelite religious viewpoint widely held at the time of Jesus. Furthermore, see number three in the ten commandments from Exodus 20 regarding this archaic idea. Secondly, because of their impairment, blind individuals were reduced to total dependence, always at the mercy of others for their very survival. Every day, the blind would come out of the woodwork, emerging from their societal shadows, and sit helplessly beside the road in what continues to be an unfortunately familiar sight today in major metropolitan cities, skills honed, a craft practiced like an artform, by those who live without homes and have perfected their panhandling skills to the best of their ability. And then, even as is the case now with those who live on the margins, generally called homeless, the underserved, compromised, yes, dispossessed, disenfranchised, these folks were often seen as annoying, a nuisance, a blight on civil society. Oh, how history painfully repeats itself, lessons never, if rarely, learned! Hopefully blind folks, as with anyone afflicted with an infirmity of some sort, would be the beneficiary of a basic level of sustenance as they solely relied on the good will, the charity of others, the Hebrew word for "charity" being "tzedakah," think Neil, as they loudly rattled their beggar's cup for all to hear, crying out in vain, hoping someone would hear and respond, that some compassionate, caring, individual would turn aside for a brief moment and bother to listen, that someone, anyone, would stop what they were doing and give a small donation, a coin or two, or on a really good day, an amazing day, given a denarius, a day's wage, by someone feeling extra charitable and blessed.

Every day these downtrodden beggars put on their game face, steeling themselves for their labor, hoping and praying that they would get lucky and would reap a small reward that would feed them for the day. To state the obvious, there were no social programs to assist any differently-abled individual with all the challenges, the hardships, associated with what we negatively and prejudicially, typically, call “handicapped,” including the misfortune of being blind. There was no solace to sooth any obstacle in their way, to assuage any issue that was put before them, to solve the myriad and insurmountable problems they faced, challenges that unhappily interrupted the monotony of their daily lives. For the most part they were on their own! By and large, they were left to their own pitiful, pathetic, devices! It was not good to be blind! Neither was it good to live with the guilt, including the guilt by association that came with the overwhelmingly demoralizing assumption that you indeed were being punished, that you were guilty of a crime against God, especially if that punishment was the result of a sin that your parents or grandparents or great grandparents, a stepcousin once removed, someone within the family system had committed. Yes, this principle applied even to ancestry, to the fourth and fifth generation. Surely, a family member had once perpetrated an act, some unknown error, against God and you were now paying the price, God carrying a huge grudge, never forgetting or forgiving. **What a load of baggage to bear, the intolerably oppressive level of grief and guilt! Imagine what it must have been like to carry the weight of that burden, what that millstone would have been like hanging from your neck, believing that God had not mercifully abandoned you but was tormenting you by holding a permanent grudge. Oh, what a heavy weight they were forced to carry.**

And so once again, we find Jesus encountering and engaging a blind man, nothing new here except this man is identified in the story, named by the Markan writer. The Gospel of Mark tells the reader that his name is Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus. Most of the characters we encounter remain anonymous figures, but not old Bart, despite in some ways this man being every person living with some kind of malady, a man who was legion, sharing his lot with countless others, blindness an affliction shared by many back in the day. Bartimaeus had been at the end of his rope for a long time, nothing left to lose, his last shred of pride long having abandoned him. Bartimaeus boldly cries out to the man from Nazareth, calling the rabbi the Son of David, a Messianic title found nowhere else in the Gospels, but radically voiced from a most unlikely source. Bartimaeus boldly proclaims Jesus as Messiah, for one and all to hear, everyone within earshot, an acclamation, a proclamation, a profound acknowledgment for which this intuitive, this all-seeing blind bystander is not in the least rebuked. No, in fact the opposite happens, Bartimaeus is rewarded for his deep insight, graciously invited to come close for a conversation, to have a one-on-one audience with Jesus. In enthusiastic haste, he carelessly tosses away his cloak, perhaps the only possession he owned, the one thing needed to keep him warm on cold nights, literally a casting of his bread on the waters, convention tossed to the wind. **Bartimaeus makes his way to Jesus, slowly feeling his way through what may have been a crowd, maybe not, suddenly standing before the one who could and would perform a life-changing, lifestyle altering, miracle. It was a meeting that surely only moments before seemed so unlikely, so impossible. Why me? Why not me? Bartimaeus, who obviously had heard of Jesus, somewhere along the line delightfully discovering this special man, Bartimaeus now stood before the one person who could make a difference, the one individual who had the ability, the power, to actually do something about Bartimaeus’ plight beyond a momentary coin in his coffer, Reformation image**

inserted here, who could make his life more than tolerable, yes, better indeed, giving him his life back. Jesus was the only one who had the evolving pedigree, yes, who had the power to heal him, curing him of his debilitating blindness. Jesus asks an interesting question of Bartimaeus, ironically the very same question that the man from Nazareth had asked of James and John in the previous story. But this is where the similarities end because the answer Bartimaeus would give was based in his humblest hopes and dreams, a sincere request if ever there were one. Bartimaeus makes the simplest desire of his heart, “My teacher,” acknowledging the reputation Jesus had built as an amateur rabbi in the local community, “Let me see again,” the text suggesting the subtle reminder that once upon a time this blind man once had his vision.

Despite the visual limitations that stifled Bartimaeus, his total lack of eyesight, it is easy to see that this was an individual, who indeed, could see and see clearly. Bartimaeus was gifted with twenty-twenty vision though he was as blind as a bat! He perceived, yes, he knew as much about Jesus, if not more, than every seeing person who witnessed this amazing moment. Bartimaeus did not need eyes to see, for something in his heart and mind showed him everything he needed to know, revealing something in his spirit, deep down in his soul. Bartimaeus sensed a presence in one who seemed to fully embody the presence of God, yes, a man with incarnational qualities. Bartimaeus experienced in Jesus’ presence a sense of awe and wonder wrapped in mystery, the essence of transcendence that even transcended his immediate need. Surely this gifted and talented rabbi could restore what was sorely lacking in Bartimaeus’ physical life, a transformation, yes, let’s say it together, a reformation, that superseded his blindness. Spiritually, the man had it going on, big time! Jesus, having heard exactly what Bartimaeus desired, granted his request in an instant, “Go! Your faith has made you well!” Yes, his faith! Nothing more! Nothing less! Jesus evidently did not have to lift a finger, did not have to do a thing, not even spit and some mud in your eye, Bartimaeus’ faith making all the difference as it always does. Truly, this narrative is the easiest text to preach because the sermon preaches itself. But, as every text seems to do, this Gospel story got me thinking, always dangerous. This story got me to ponder possibilities beyond the boundaries of the biblical texts, causing me to consider this annual tradition we celebrate as we once again observe the Protestant Reformation, giving thanks for a rich heritage, our proud legacy, going strong for more than five hundred years.

But let’s stop for a moment here and shift gears! Let’s put a pause on this story, turn our attention elsewhere, taking a sharp detour! Speaking of eyesight, while we are on that subject, let’s dramatically shift gears. In light of our overarching theme for today, let’s explore another question, just what was it that separated Martin Luther from the herd, just what was it, not only that he saw, but what allowed him to see? What made him so perceptive, so intuitive? And we are not talking about the amount of beer that Luther could consume in a day! But who knows, he may have been lit when he had the audacity, the guts, to post those infamous ninety-five theses? What gave him the courage, when he could have easily drunk from the well of power, privilege and prestige, enjoying all the fruits, the features and benefits, that came with being at the top of the food chain? What was it that he saw that moved him beyond the trappings that were hardwired, built into a massive system, the Roman Catholic Church having become a powerful juggernaut of institutional rigidity and inflexibility, abuses running rampant, especially among the clergy and the governments

who profited by supporting them and their self-serving actions. Well, it was Luther's faith! Nothing more! Nothing less! After all, Martin Luther had it made! Luther was a member of the club, passing all the rites of initiation, highly educated in a predominately ignorant, illiterate, world, ordained into the upper echelons of comfort and security, the next best thing to say, becoming a lawyer, something his father desperately wanted his gifted son to become. All Luther had to do was to continue to drink the ecclesiastical Kool Aid while dutifully, faux joyfully, fake it 'til you make it, dispensing to the gullible masses the toxic but tasty elixir, a poisonous concoction created in the bowels of the Vatican. Luther saw what he saw and what he saw made him sick. Unlike so many of his colleagues, contemporaries who found the priesthood a wonderful escape from the drudgery of Medieval life, Luther was authentically sincere, genuinely transparent, a real person of faith, buoyed by an unrelenting and unbending integrity. Like turning on and off a light switch, once you see what you see you cannot ever forget what you see. Luther saw institutional Catholic corruption everywhere he turned, the power of the papacy a puppet of its own greed. This insidious cancer was deeply entrenched, almost irrevocably embedded into the system. In the perversity that was the sale of indulgences, a worthless piece of paper blessed by the Pope, stamped with the imprimatur of his official seal, guaranteeing the recipient a "get out of hell", uh, purgatory, free card, Luther snapped over what for him was the last straw. An insidious invention, a portion of the proceeds from indulgences went directly into the greasy cassocks of those peddling these fake promises, while the remainder, the bulk, of the profits going to pay for St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, the magnificent edifice we still enjoy seeing today. Yes, this opulent, gold-gilded monument to Peter was built thanks, in large part, to some ill-gotten gains, the labors of those who feared the fires of hell and were manipulated into coughing up their minimum wage by sinister clergy. Luther had finally had enough, had reached his boiling point, his point of no return. Even so, all he wanted was a discussion, some dialogue, a little debate perhaps, yes, some civil conversation. Not! The rest is history as we say. He posted his grievances, a document including a laundry list of ninety-five theses, each one questioning, challenging, the legitimacy of points that would soon become points of contention. The Protestant Reformation was off and running, all because one concerned citizen, a clergy insider, saw something and said something. Seeing is believing! Seeing is doing! Seeing is seeing!

Martin Luther was a flawed individual, in no means perfect, "perfect" a word that should never be even remotely employed when describing human beings, despite the human being created in the very image of God. Just like our founding fathers, many, if not most, of whom were slave holders, a sin that continues, and unfortunately always will, taint the groundwater of our democracy, Luther had some seriously demonic baggage, his antisemitism clearly articulated in print despite some who go out of their way, seeking to clean up his legacy in that regard. Luther celebrated the drowning of Anabaptists, the forebears, the precursor to Mennonites, peaceful people of faith, who believed in immersion for baptism, which meant that they were accused of a second baptism, and thus a forbidden rebaptism, heresy of all heresies. Yes, Luther thought that they had taken the new movement, his proprietary movement, too far, and that they deserved the horrific fate that they mercilessly received. I guess, Luther, like all of us, is a reminder that there is good and bad in all of us, a struggle with which we wrestle every day we have breath. I guess some of that reality is grounded in what we see and what do not see, what we choose to see and what we choose not to see. There are so many in authority, so many in power, powerful leaders who relish the privilege and prestige their

positions hold for them, the benefits rewarding what some arrogantly pretend to be service but is based in being served. In our political climate, as an important election looms on the horizon, the future of this country literally up for grabs, we all know the players and we see those who either fail to see or refuse to see. Politics in the pulpit is not my thing and never will be, but it is all I can do to keep from crossing that strict church and state boundary implied in the establishment clause of the Constitution, blurring a line from which there is no return. So, pay attention to everything you see and see what you see and believe, the first time, what your eyes show you to be true, and yes, what your ears tell you. Yes, I had to get our ears in this sermon somewhere!

The writer of the Gospel of Mark tells us, that upon his sight being restored, that Bartimaeus immediately left everything behind, though in all fairness, all he possessed was a cloak, no hard thing to leave in the dust, and followed Jesus on the way and a whim. What we know from our reading of the Gospels, that following Jesus on the way meant taking up a cross, was indeed a death march, a death sentence, a one-way trip to Jerusalem and a hill called Calvary at a place called Golgotha, the skull. No doubt, Bartimaeus saw this cross clearly as he made this spur of the moment, this absolutely instantaneous, decision, without the least hesitation, no debate about it whatsoever, no turning back, no turning back. The question before us today is not about what Jesus would do for us, we already get that fully, but what we can do for Jesus. And doing for Jesus always means doing for our neighbors, our brothers and sisters, siblings known and unknown, named and oh so anonymous. The questions before us as we ponder this short but very full story from Mark today are simple, “What do we see?” “How do we see?” “Who do we see?” Bartimaeus, as blind as blind can be, reminds us that we do not need eyeballs to see! Ray Stevens, with his beautiful hit song from back in the day, “Everything Is Beautiful” included a most salient, sobering, line, that “there are none as blind as those who will not see!” It is a telling phrase indeed. Some choose to look the other way, while there are some who go out of their way to see, to help, to meet whatever need they see. Sometimes we look the other way when we should look all around us, yes, to see what there is to see in a hurting, struggling, world, a world sorely lacking in justice, devoid in so many locales of social justice. Some choose not to overlook abuse, injustice, inequity. I always love how the word “oversight” can be a very positive and a very negative word all based on context. Today we are being reminded that indeed, seeing is believing, and that so much of our seeing has nothing to do with our eyesight, but everything to do with our faith. The story of Bartimaeus is an insightful reminder, as is the life of Martin Luther who I had to go out of my way to get into this sermon, though he was indeed flawed in so many respects, as are we all, reminding us of what is possible when we choose to see, to see in ways that transcend the limited spectrum of what appears obvious to us, helping us have a much better perspective, allowing us to see the present even into the future, and not just knowing what we see clearly in the rearview mirror of life as helpful as those viewpoints are. May we have eyes to see, to see beyond ourselves, our local community, even our limited worldview, seeing all there is to see in a pluralistic, multi-cultural world that desperately needs better sight lines. Seeing is as seeing does!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, and gives us the capacity to see, whether we have eyes to see or not! Amen and amen!

