

Saved by Faith

Mark 10.46-52

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October 28, 2018

Today, on Reformation Sunday, we give thanks for the bold and courageous witness of Martin Luther. A witness which in faithfulness to God and out of love for God's people held the church accountable for its dangerous application of a Gospel-less doctrine. The work of Martin Luther stemmed from his unwavering belief that we are, as Paul said, "Saved by grace through faith and not through works of our own." (Eph 2.8-9) Today's Gospel story is a testimony to the saving power of faith.

In today's story we meet Bartimaeus, a man who is blind and who is begging on the road outside Jericho. The road which leads to Jerusalem. Though this road was dangerous, it was also very busy. Regardless of the weather, the road is filled with travelers. Men bartering deals as they walk their donkeys to market – the backs of the beasts concaved by the weight of hopeful fortunes. Young boys and girls singing songs, laughing, and playing as they usher their flocks of sheep and lamb to the next green valley. Women and girls sharing wisdom and gossip as they haul water and wood back to their hearth. Families on their pilgrimage to the temple, giddy with anticipation. Babies crying. Dogs barking. Quails cooing. Trumpets sounding, drums beating, and footsteps falling like torrential rain as the Roman legion marches through. And anonymous coins dropping with dull thuds on the cloak that collects the alms for Bartimaeus the blind beggar.

When Bartimaeus' blindness hit, the game of life that he had been playing came to screeching halt. He was abruptly checkmated and forced to leave the game. Ostracized, excluded, pushed to the margins. Vision was understood to be the result of a living light which existed within one's heart. It was as if a fire burned within one's heart and that fire came out of the body, through the eyes in the form of vision. A

lack of vision implied the absence of a living light. One was only able to see darkness because one's heart was assumed to be filled with darkness.¹ In a society that upheld rigid boundaries between pure and impure, holy and unholy, there was no room for people whose hearts were "dark".

So, pushed out and left to fend for himself, Bartimaeus' did the best he knew how. He found a way to get by. He found a safe spot to plant himself on the dangerous road. He found a decent seat on soil hardened by boulders, rocks, and roots. He found stability in the midst of a rapidly fluctuating pedestrian crowd. And he found his version of financial security on the road between Jericho and Jerusalem. Bartimaeus took the hand he had been dealt and made the most of it.

We have no idea how long Bartimaeus had been sitting in this spot. We don't know if he had been there one month, one year, or ten years. What we do know is that as he sat on the road side, attentive to the sounds around him, he could not help but notice that life was passing him by. He could not help but feel that he had become a spectator rather than a participator in his own life. He was functioning in the role that society had given him and he was doing it with relatively well. And yet, he was isolated, lonely, silenced, and stifled. People would give him alms but they would not speak to him. For a man with no eyesight this meant that the dull thuds of the coins hitting his cloak were the only indication that someone had noticed him. He may have said "thank you," but by time he registered their presence they were likely beyond ear shot. And as a beggar he knew to keep his voice quiet and to limit his words to that which his benefactors deemed acceptable – humility, flattery and gratitude.

One of the ironies of this story, and I am sure Bartimaeus recognized this, is that he was inundated with faithfully financial charity by the same people who honored the religious laws that caused and perpetuated his poverty. Religious laws, deeming purity more important than humanity, declared

¹ *The New Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible, A-C, Vol 1.* Abdingdon Press: Nashville, 2006.

Bartimaeus an outsider. And Bartimaeus lived off of the charity that God's people offered because God insisted that God's people care for the poor.

Though Bartimeaus could clearly "see" this he had no forum for addressing it. He was required to sit still, be quiet, be content with what he was given, and not cause a scene.

And then Jesus shows up...

Though Bartimeaus had never met Jesus, he knew of the man from Nazareth. He had heard the conversations about Jesus taking place among those traveling by. As people spoke about Jesus he heard hope and joy in the voices of poor, worry and fear in the voices of the wealthy, and anger and fury in the voices of the authorities. He heard about the miracles Jesus has been performing – healing untreatable conditions, bringing the dead back to life, and feeding unfathomable numbers of people with near nothing. He heard about the boundaries Jesus was violating – eating with the dirty, touching the sick, embracing the impure, empowering women, softening men, and honoring children. He heard about the sermons Jesus had been delivering – sermons about love, hope, power, freedom, and liberation. He heard about the critical orations Jesus was delivering – critiques of the power-hungry church, the inhumane Empire, and the everyday oppressive practices and attitudes of ordinary people. He heard about the masses that Jesus was drawing. He heard about the movement that Jesus was generating. And he heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem.

So Bartimeaus, who had sat still for so long his muscles ached and his bones hurt;
who had remained quiet for so long that he no longer recognized his own voice;
who had defended his indefensible circumstances for so long he no longer trusted his own judgement;
who had focused on acting "appropriately" for so long that he had lost his own identity;
who had believed this was the only way his life could be and therefore tried to make it feel better by justifying it all;

This Bartimaeus waited with hopeful assurance that once Jesus arrived his life would be radically different.

Bartimaeus believed that Jesus of Nazareth was capable of delivering him from the bondage of his own life. A bondage so extreme and so oppressive that if Jesus could free him, then Bartimaeus believed Jesus could free anyone. With power like this, Bartimaeus knew that Jesus was more than a man from Nazareth. Bartimaeus knew he was the Messiah, the Son of David.

The man with no vision who was wrapped in the cloak of a beggar heard the sounds in the distance. The unique, fragmented sounds that he heard throughout each day, the voices of men and women, children and babies, dogs and quails, lamb and sheep, were clustered together in an indistinguishable, unpredictable, avant-garde movement sustained by a rapidly crescendoing percussion of footsteps.

As the sounds came closer, as the sounds grew louder, Bartimaeus' courage and confidence grew. He began to use his voice, to assert his need, to create a scene, to act inappropriately, to cry out with full force over and over and over again, "Son of David, have mercy on me." He shouted, screamed, and hollered his need - knowing this was his one chance. Bartimaeus had to make sure the One who could liberate him was able to hear him.

We know how the story ends. Jesus heard Bartimaeus' cries, stopped the caravan, called Bartimaeus to him, and asked, "What do you need me to do for you?" Bartimaeus responded, "My teacher, restore my sight." And Jesus did.

Martin Luther's understanding of God's love, the theology which we Lutherans profess and choose to live by, is based upon the belief that we are saved by faith alone.

It was Bartimaeus' faith in Jesus that liberated him from the bondage in which he had been living.

It was Bartimaeus' faith in Jesus that allowed him to see the world as it was rather than as God intends it to be.

It was Bartimaeus' faith in Jesus that allowed him to believe that a different life was possible.

It was Bartimaeus' faith in Jesus that gave him the courage to hope for a different future.

It was Bartimaeus' faith in Jesus that gave him reason to shout and keep shouting even as others demanded him to be silent.

It was Bartimaeus' faith in Jesus that gave him the resolve make a spectacle regardless of the consequences.

It was Bartimaeus' faith in Jesus that allowed him to shuck off his cloak and all the money it contained – his whole life's savings – and follow Jesus.

It was Bartimaeus' faith in Jesus that allowed him to believe that he and his life were worth fighting for.

Bartimaeus was made well, he was saved by his faith.

One final note before I wrap up. The next story in the Gospel is the story of Jesus' entry into the Jerusalem – it is the Palm Sunday story. Scripture tells that some of Jesus' followers ran ahead announcing that the Son of David was on his way. I image that Bartimaeus leading the caravan. He who in his blindness was unable to move without assistance, was now running so fiercely his feet could not keep up with his legs. And he who by his poverty was muzzled in his of speech, was now shouting with such unbreakable vigor that this throat was raw and his lungs burned. I imagine Bartimaeus, tears running down his face, standing boldly at the gate of Jerusalem, declaring to the world that which he knew to be true: "The Son of David is coming! Hosanna! Hosanna in the Highest!"

Amen.