

Sermon: October 25, 2009

Scripture: Job 42:1-6; Hebrews 7:23-28; Mark 10:46-52

Title: "A Cure for Blindness"

Hymns: # 476 O Worship The King

311 We Meet You, O Christ

466 O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing

Call to Worship: Psalm 34:1-8

I will bless the Lord at all times;

God's praise shall continually be in my mouth.

My soul makes its boast in the Lord;

Let the afflicted hear and be glad.

O magnify the Lord with me,

And let us exalt God's name together!

Yes, we will exalt God's name together!

I sought the Lord and God answered me.

And delivered me from all my fears.

Look to God and be radiant;

So your faces shall never be ashamed.

This poor man cried, and the Lord heard him.

And saved him out of all his troubles.

The angel of the Lord encamps around

Those who fear God, and delivers them.

O taste and see that the Lord is good!

Happy is the person who takes refuge in God!

Prayer of Confession:

Eternal God, you bring light into our world when we are caught in the darkness. You open up eyes that are blind and hearts that cannot see. But there are times when we would rather live in the darkness. We are comfortable in our ignorance and complacency. We like to have things our way, even if that way conflicts with your love and grace. Forgive our foolish ways and our hard hearts. Open us up to the light of your love and the peace of your grace. We pray in the name of The Light of The World, even Jesus Christ. Amen.

Sermon: October 25, 2009

Scripture: Mark 10:46-52 (Job 42:1-6)

Title: "A Cure for Blindness"

This is such a simple story. Once I was blind, but now I can see! There are no hidden meanings in this story, no twists and turns that might cause us to question or reject the healing of Bartimaeus. We learn that Bartimaeus was once able to see. He once had the ability to see shapes and forms, colors and shades. Once upon a time he could see the light of the glaring sun and the iridescence of the moon. In another time, when he was younger, he could recognize his mother and father. But something happened. I wish we had a diagnosis from a Ophthalmologist. Was it early onset of cataracts? Did he suffer trauma to the head? Did a virus attack the nerve cells and destroy his sight? So many questions. But it does not really matter what caused his blindness. What matters is that once he was blind, but because of Jesus he regained his eyesight.

A closer look reveals some very interesting nuances to this story.

Number One: as a blind person he did what every blind person was expected by society to do. Sit by the side of the road and beg. Each day a member of his family would lead him to the highway where sighted people passed. He had no other usefulness to his family or to society, than to garner a few coins each day to help with his upkeep. I remember as a child passing blind people on the street who simply sat there and held out a cup. In that cup were pencils. A passerby would drop a coin or two in the cup and take a pencil in return. Very few actually took the pencil. It was very important that the blind beggar of my childhood be seen not as a total leach on society, but as one who was involved in trade. A few coins for a pencil made the blind man's situation more acceptable. In Jesus' day, the blind and the crippled of society were expected to beg for a living.

Down in Snow Creek there is a store that is known throughout the county as the Blind Man's Store. For many years, Gordon Overstreet ran that store, in spite of the fact that he had been blinded at an early age. He and a couple of friends had been out squirrel hunting. When they found a squirrel hole up in a tree, Gordon climbed up to roust the squirrels out of that hole. Well, out came a squirrel and Kabam, one of his buddies on the ground fired his shot gun at the squirrel. The only problem was that Gordon's face was right in the line of fire. From that day, Gordon never saw the light of day. It's a wonder he lived, but he did. After some training at the school for the blind in Staunton, VA, Gordon came back to Snow Creek, married, had a family and ran a country store. Somehow he could tell the difference between a \$1.00, a \$5.00 and a \$20.00 bill. And another thing, he was known for four counties around as the best chair caner in the territory. People brought their old rockers and their old ladder back chairs to him when they needed re-caneing. Somehow, his finger tips could feel the flat cane strips as they wove their way in and out in a basket weave design.

How different it was for Gordon Overstreet as compared to Bartimaeus. They did not have a school for the blind back then. They did not know that a blind person had worth, other than to beg. They did not realize that a blind person could train other senses to take over where the sight was useless. They tell the story of Gordon getting up on the roof of his little house and nailing down shingles. He did the whole roof, by lining up the shingles with the touch of his fingers and then putting his thumb over the head of the nail, resting the hammer head on his thumb nail, raising the hammer and bringing it down on the nail head, removing his thumb just before he hit the head of the nail.

In Jesus' time society had much lower expectations for those who were denied some part of their normal functioning. The blind, the

lame, the crippled, the mentally challenged, the distorted and the afflicted. These were the outcasts of society.

Number 2: In Jesus' day there was the assumption that you were afflicted because of some sin. Either something you did to displease God, or something your parents did. Remember that passage: "The sins of the fathers are heaped on the heads of the second and third generation..." Somehow society believed that God would take his vengeance out on the children and grandchildren and the great grandchildren. Can you imagine such a thing? What kind of God is this that he would strike little children with blindness because their parents sinned? That is certainly not the God we worship. We know more now than we did in Jesus' day. We know how the body functions. We know that the genes sometimes get mixed up and the abnormalities of birth happen by chance, not by the direction of God. We know that when the human growth cells are not given the correct building blocks they go haywire. We know that a virus can attack the beta cells in the pancreas and juvenile diabetes will occur. We know much more today which makes this story of Bartimaeus more understandable.

Our Old Testament reading is from the final chapter of Job. It is the vindication of Job.

Beset by all manner of ailments, disappointments, losses and afflictions, Job refuses to curse God despite his friends who admonished him to turn on God and curse him. And for their bad advice, God puts Job over them. For his trust and faith in God, Job is rewarded with a new family, with sons and daughters, with lands and cattle. So, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar were told by God that their prayers had no effect on him. Only the prayers of Job would be heard by God and so they had to go to Job to receive any blessing from God. And when Job prays to God in their behalf, his fortunes are restored to him. Job's afflictions were not the result of any sin on his part, but the outworking of the natural world's

malfunctions. Job knew this and refused to blame God. Job's story contradicts the mainline understanding of Jewish Tradition: that you are afflicted because of some sin in your past or in your parents' past.

Jesus challenges the traditional thinking with regard to Bartimaeus' blindness. When poor Bartimaeus heard that Jesus was headed his way, he cries out: "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me." Evidently Bartimaeus had no problem with his hearing. This story presupposes that Bartimaeus had some knowledge of Jesus. News had spread. Word had gotten around. Even though Bartimaeus could not see, he could hear the gossip on the street and around the village well. When they came at the end of the day to fetch him home from his begging spot, he listened to the conversations in his home. No one of that day, not even a blind person could be ignorant of what God was doing in this humble carpenter from Nazareth. It was common knowledge that Jesus had cast a demon out of a young boy. Before that he had healed a deaf-mute, and fed 5000 hungry followers and lots left over and a blind man had been returned to sight over in Bethsaida. But now, Jesus was approaching. Bartimaeus could hear the noise of the crowd. If he wanted Jesus to heal him too, he would have to cry out loudly. So he cried: Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me." And louder he cried: Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me." And people began to try to hush him up. "Be quiet!" "Don't make so much noise." "Don't bother the Master." "He has other important business here in Jericho." But that only made Bartimaeus shout even louder: Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me."

Stop and think for a minute. Why not simply: "Jesus, have mercy on me."? Why throw in "Son of David"? How did Bartimaeus know that Jesus was of the house and lineage of David? Because the word was out. All of Judea was talking about this carpenter who hailed from Nazareth, but actually was of David's lineage.

This is important because it gives credence to the Jewish belief that the Messiah was to arise from the house of David. Read Isaiah: ***A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse, from his roots a Branch will bear fruit....***”(Is. 11:1) and read Jeremiah: ***The days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch....***(Jer. 23:5) And read Ezekiel: ***I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd.*** (Ezek 43:23)

The word spread like wild fire. If you will look back at the first chapter of Mark you will find these simple words: ***“News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee.*** (Mk 1:28) It should be no surprise that Bartimaeus knew that this Jesus fellow was the promised Messiah. So any appeal to him should carry the full weight of who he is. “Jesus, son of David.... Jesus, The long expected Messiah.... Jesus, the Savior of the world.... Have mercy on me.”

And the crowds wanted to hush him up. Some perhaps because they were Pharisees and Sadducees who were not ready to acknowledge him as the Messiah. And some because they did see Jesus as the Messiah and therefore he should not be bothered by a social outcast like a blind man. And Bartimaeus’ response to being shushed up is to cry out even louder: “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.” Well, that did it. Jesus came to a stop and commanded that the one making all that noise be brought to him. At that, the tone of the crowds changes. “Be of good cheer, rise, He is calling you.”

I can imagine that the Pharisees and Sadducees and Scribes were standing back with cynical scows on their faces, thinking to themselves. “OK, we’ve heard tales of his miracles... now let’s see if he can produce.” They were prepared to pounce on Jesus if he could not cure this poor blind man.

Jesus spoke to Bartimaeus, asking one simple question: “What do you want me to do for you.?” Jesus must have known what Bartimaeus wanted. It was obvious. Blind people wish for sight. And that is what Bartimaeus asked for. “Rabboni, that I may receive sight.”

And that is what Jesus did. He restored sight to Bartimaeus. Not like the time he made a mud pack with his saliva and packed it in the eye sockets of another blind man. This time he simply said: “Go your way; your faith has made you well.”

Now you might think that we have reached the high point of the story. Once I was blind but now I can see. Isn't that what this story is all about? I don't think so. I think it is all about what we do when we receive new life. What do we do when our blindness is cured. What do we do when Jesus frees us up from some habit or problem that is hindering our life. What do we do when the Love of Christ fills us in such a way that all the previous pain and agony we have experienced is wiped away. How do we respond when the light of Christ's Peace is turned on in us and we become new creatures. Do we go right back to our spot by the side of the road and beg for alms? I don't think so. If we used to be a bigot and hated people of color, or people who come into our county and take our jobs, and God works his miracle of love in us so that we have our eyes opened and we see them as His children, then do we go right back to our bigoted opinions? No, we move into a new stage of life. That's what this story is all about. Mark notes: “And immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus on the road.” This man became a disciple. And you cannot become a disciple and go back to the same old place you were in before God touched your life.

So, what was the real miracle here. The cure of a blind man? Or the changing of a life?

In the drug counseling field, we have a saying for individuals who have been into the life of a street druggie. Once they are clean and after a period of rehabilitation they need to think twice before they go back to their old haunts. We say: You need to change your places and faces. Going back to the same street corner where they copped their drugs and getting back in with the old buddies who used with them is a prescription for disaster.

Getting clean requires a new path. Coming to the light of Christ requires a new path. The blind man chose his path, he followed the one who set him free. And that is the whole point of this story. "Once I was blind, but now I can see. Forever after His follower I'll be."

In what ways has the Love of Christ freed you up from something that restricted your life? And once you were set free, did you immediately set your feet on a path to become one of His followers? Bartimaeus did!

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