

October 29, 2006  
Isaiah 35, Mark 10:46-52  
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“The Gift of Sight”

Bartimaeus is man under a curse on the sidelines of life. Whatever promise his life once had has been taken away from him. His blindness has reduced him to begging for food and money. The fact that he is known by name as the Son of Timaeus suggests that he once had a family that cared about him and cared for him. Now, day after day, he sits beside the road into Jerusalem eating the dust of other people's parades. His cloak is the only protection he has from the hot days and the cold nights.

Yet, Bartimaeus has something that even the disciples lack. There are some things that life cannot take away from you. Bartimaeus has faithful imagination.

In “The Preaching Life,” Barbara Brown Taylor says that religious imagination is the capacity to see God in the world around us and in the experiences of life. It is like the young child who roams the neighborhood and explores the world of sights, sounds and smells and brings home treasures gleaned from the day's harvest. Brown writes:

“When imagination comes home and empties its pockets, of course there will be some sorting to do. Keep the cat's-eye marble, the Japanese beetle wing, the red feather, the penny. Jettison the bottle cap, the broken glass, the melted chocolate stuck with lint. There are no treasures without some trash. The Holy Spirit can be trusted to go with us when we wander and to lead us back home again, with eyes far wiser for all they have seen.” (p.48) Bartimaeus has the faith to imagine a God who acts in the world.

In his mind's eye, he can see God fulfilling the promises God made through the prophet Isaiah:

“Then shall the eyes of the blind be opened, And the ears of the deaf unstopped; Then the lame shall leap like a deer, And the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.” (35:5, 6) He has a hunger to know God and to understand God's ways. Bartimaeus is looking for something more than what others tell him about the way things are. He refuses to sit quietly and accept his situation. He knows that God intends more for his life than being a beggar. Bartimaeus is the kind of person who stirs up trouble, demands justice and refuses to be silent.

Bartimaeus' religious imagination enables him to see what the sighted disciples cannot see. When Jesus approaches Bartimaeus on the road from Jericho to Jerusalem, Bartimaeus senses something new in the air. Even in the dark world of his blindness, with the dust of the road on his face, with the sweaty smells of animals and travelers in his nostrils and in spite of the scornful comments of the crowds in his ears, he can tell trash from treasure in all he experiences that day.

When he hears that Jesus of Nazareth is passing by, he shouts, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” This is the first time in Mark's gospel that someone calls Jesus the Son of David. On the edge of Jerusalem, the city of David, Jesus is proclaimed as David's son, full of mercy and compassion for the afflicted and outcast. The Son of David, on the way to his kingly city, takes time to heal a blind beggar. In Jesus' compassion, we see where God is present in the world.

Not everyone has eyes to see. The disciples try to silence Bartimaeus; but Jesus calls Bartimaeus to come to him. Jesus asks Bartimaeus what he wants him to do for him. Bartimaeus asks for the one thing that the disciples lack—clear vision. Jesus responds, “Go, your faith has made you well.” The

word “to make well” means more than physical healing. The word also means “to make whole” or “to save.” By the end of the story, Bartimaeus, who was “beside the road (way)” sidelined by his blindness, is now following Jesus “on the road (way)” to Jerusalem. He sees clearly what the others have yet to see. He is transformed so that he too becomes a follower of Jesus.

The eyes of faith are the far wiser eyes that see what some never seem to see.

Bartimaeus, a man scorned by others, catches sight of the redemptive work of God in Jesus. The gift of sight enables him to perceive what God is doing in the day-to-day world in which we live. The Christian writer Thomas Moore has written in “The Care of the Soul,” “There are two ways of thinking about church and religion. One is that we go to church in order to be in the presence of the holy, to learn and to have our lives influenced by that presence. The other is that church teaches us...to see the sacred dimension of everyday life. In this latter sense, religion is... a way of sustaining mindfulness about the religion that is inherent in everything we do.

For some, religion is a Sunday affair, and they risk dividing life into the holy Sabbath and the secular week. For others, religion is a weeklong observance that is inspired and sustained on the Sabbath.” (pp. 214-5).

We are here to receive the eyes of faith, so that we may learn to look beneath the surface of things in order to see the holy presence of God in everything we do, in every person we meet and in every place we go. Faith is not just “a Sunday affair.” The Christian faith is a way of looking at the world that transforms all of our experiences.

I believe God has given each one of us this gift of religious imagination, this gift of spiritual vision, to see things as God sees them. We tend to let the cares of the world or the fear within us dim our vision. We are afraid of losing control, of finding ourselves in unfamiliar circumstances, of letting somebody else have the limelight, of letting go of long-held convictions or of giving up our advantage. When was the last time you tried to see Jesus in the people you find hardest to get along with? When was the last time you stopped thinking so much about being right and really listened with an open mind and heart to your spouse, your children, your parents, your friend?

Our community is struggling with so many issues such as violent crime, quality education and affordable housing. Maybe it is time we stopped repeating the same old clichés about these problems. Simply repeating our fixed ideas keeps us in our comfort zone and demands nothing of us. Maybe it is time we started listening with an open spirit to people whose life experiences, backgrounds and ideas are different from our own. We need to use our spiritual sight, our faithful imagination, to see God in the most difficult people and the hardest situations we face.

In 1853, Henry Ward Beecher, the first pastor of Second Presbyterian Church, was serving as pastor of the famous Plymouth Congregation in Brooklyn, New York. That year, a Methodist minister named Ellington came from Missouri to Indianapolis to arrest a former slave named John Freeman. Ellington claimed that John Freeman was his runaway slave. Fifteen years before, Beecher had known Freeman while he was in Indiana. Freeman owned property in the city and had established a business as a painter and handyman. He had established an excellent reputation.

In fact, he had become a man of some property—having saved \$6000. Freeman had married a young woman who had been a housekeeper in the Beecher home. The Freemans had three children and were members of the Baptist Church. When Freeman was arrested, the people of Indianapolis were stunned. Over 100 leading citizens of Indianapolis, including two judges, tried to put up the \$1600 bail.

Freeman was denied bail as he waited for his trial.

Ellington saw the situation as a matter of reclaiming his property. Beecher saw the situation as one of injustice and inhumanity. He saw the situation through the eyes of faith. In an editorial he wrote, Beecher painted with his faithful imagination a picture of the terrible irony of a minister of the gospel traveling 500 miles to enslave a fellow Christian, crush a person's life, destroy a family and outrage a community. Beecher declared the laws immoral that allowed such evil to be done, within the bounds of the law, with the approval of some Christian people. Beecher declared that such laws and such inhuman actions "destroy the conscience and humanity of community." He declared that, even though human hearts may be corrupt, there is one supreme uncorrupted heart that stands as judge over all and will not let such injustice long stand. ("The Minister Hunting his Slave," *The Liberator* [Boston], July 29, 1853).

Beecher knew that it would take our nation a long time to catch sight of God and our own human injustice. It may take some time to catch sight of God in our own lives, in our families and in our community. After all, we do not know how long Bartimaeus sat beside the road waiting, just waiting, for Jesus before he heard the Son of David pass by and saw in his mind's eye all that Jesus could do. When he found Jesus, he threw off his cloak and followed him into Jerusalem. For the first time in his life, he could truly see where he was going.