

**October 25, 2015**

**TEXT: Mark 10:46–52**

**TITLE: Let Me See Again**

The theme for today is blindness, guided by the story of the miraculous healing of blind Bartimaeus. Actually, that's not quite true. The themes for today are Reformation Sunday, baptism, and stewardship; acting for justice, proclaiming the gospel of Christ's inclusive love, and being ambassadors of hope to a tired, broken and disbelieving world. Yet with those many themes, the overarching metaphor – the point of reference for all those other topics – is blindness.

Like the old hymn says: *Open my eyes that I may see; glimpses of truth thou hast for me. Open my eyes, illumine me, Spirit divine.*

Once long ago, Jesus, his disciples and a large crowd of followers left the city of Jericho. As they exited the city gates, they passed by a blind beggar named Bartimaeus—who was surprisingly a very good Presbyterian. Really. There is lots of proof of this. First off, look at where he was located. Bartimaeus was right there in the thick of things. He was at the city gates, where everyone went in and went out; where friends met, where stories were told, where all humanity traveled - from the prosperous farmer or merchant with their full saddlebags and bulging money purses to the poor beggars, standing with outstretched hands hoping for some work, for a copper coin or crust of bread. Presbyterians have never been called to country club gated communities, but instead have always been meant to be in the thick of things: at the gritty city gates, the thoroughfares for all walks of life. They are meant to be engaged with all people because they are all children of God, whether they know it or not, whether they profess it or not, whether they live it out or not—and I include each of us in those same three categories. For too long some Christians have believed themselves to be “gatekeepers”, barring entry to others out of prejudicial, racist, and status-driven motives, when in truth we are meant to be “gate-greeters” —stepping forth into the tumult of life, guiding, supporting, comforting, and praising God in the parade of life that always includes the Prince of Peace as its drum major.

A second reason Bartimaeus was a good Presbyterian was that when the possibility for gospel change came along, he wasn't afraid to shout, to cause a ruckus and make his voice heard. The crowd tried to shush him, because he was a social embarrassment; he wasn't staying in his place, there on the margins. No, he dared to make his presence known—like Luther did when he nailed his 95 Theses up and started the Protestant Reformation 500 years ago; like John Witherspoon did—the Presbyterian minister who was the only clergyman to sign the Declaration of Independence, even though to do so was a death warrant, having affixed his name to a document of treason in the eyes of Great Britain. Presbyterians have shouted out for women's ordination, for Civil Rights and anti-racism, for full inclusion of gay and lesbian members, for peace in the Middle East, for an end to the death penalty, for true justice.

The crowds tried to silence Bartimaeus, to deflect Jesus' attention from this beggar by the side of the road. That tactic is still used today. In a society in which almost all the economic growth of the past 30 years has gone to the top 10% of wealthy Americans, experts try to deflect this injustice with language about trickle down economics.<sup>1</sup> Trickle down economics is a lie and has no place in a gospel predicated on working for the common good and serving a God whose generosity (as it says in Luke 6) doesn't trickle down, but is bountiful, intended to be pressed down, shaken together, running over the top, so no one lives in want.

Another tactic of deflection emerges when we shout about gun control. The argument is raised that criminals will always get guns. This is a deflection from the real issue that handgun violence in America is a national health crisis. More than 30,000 people a year die in this country from gun violence. For 15–24 year olds, it's the second leading cause of death, unless you're African American—then it's the leading cause of death. For every time a gun is used in self-defense, guns have already been used 11 times for a completed or attempted suicide, 7 times in a criminal assault or homicide, and 4 times in an accidental shooting. Let's deal with the health crisis that guns create through a national registry of gun ownership, a ban on assault weapons, and child-proof safety features; and shout out until positive change happens.

A third reason Bartimaeus was a good Presbyterian was that when the call of Christ came to him, he got up. He tossed aside his beggar's cloak and stepped through the crowd—no longer someone on the margins, but now a child of God clearly in the spotlight of faith. He got up, like Hannah did of old, who prayed and became the mother of Samuel. He got up, like Mary did when she heard the angel's amazing message and got up to visit her cousin Elizabeth and bravely show the world that her pregnancy was real and a witness to God coming into our midst. Presbyterians get up and stand around the baptism font, saying to the world that our allegiance is first and foremost to God—not to race or tribe or nation. Presbyterians get up as we share communion, caring not who is next to us at the table because all are called to receive the bread and cup when Christ is the host. Presbyterians get up when two people—same-gender or different gender—say their marriage vows to each other before God, whose spirit and grace gives them the strength to take seriously this covenant of union. Remember: a living church is a moving church. That's why we get up.

Fourth, in the most poignant moment of the entire passage, Jesus called Bartimaeus to come to him. Bartimaeus got up, went over, and heard Christ ask him, "What do you want me to do for you?" This was not a shallow request. This is not "What do you want for dinner? What would you do if you had a million dollars? What will make you happy?" No, Jesus' question is deeper than that. He asked: "What do you want—what will bring you fully to life, for you are asking it of the only one who can truly grant that request." Bartimaeus' blindness was real. He lived in darkness. He lived on the margins of society—begging, shouting for attention, trying to survive. In the eyes of the world, he was nothing. But when he

said, “Teacher, let me see again,” he was asking for more than sight. He was asking to look out and connect and belong to the world again.

Isaye Barnwell of the musical group Sweet Honey in the Rock has written a beautiful song called “No Mirrors in my Nana’s House.” Its lyrics say this:  
*There were no mirrors in my Nana’s house, no mirrors in my Nana’s house;  
And the beauty that I saw in everything was in her eyes.  
I never knew that my skin was too black. I never knew that my nose was too flat.  
I never knew that my clothes didn’t fit. I never knew there were things I’d missed.  
‘Cause the beauty in everything was in her eyes.  
There were no mirrors in my Nana’s house.*

The first thing Bartimaeus saw was his own reflection in the eyes of Jesus. The first thing he saw was a world defined by this Messiah who looked at him, healed him, loved and accepted him. No mirrors of the world could ever call him blind Bartimaeus again—no crowds could shout and shush him as a beggar again—no citizens could walk past him indifferently and hatefully again. Jesus gave Bartimaeus what he asked for—to see and be seen as a beloved child of God.

If you were asked that question by Jesus, what would you say? From what blindness do you want to be released? From what flawed mirrors do you wish to be delivered? Presbyterians, with our belief in God’s sovereignty, God’s providence, and God’s grace, also believe in doing things with intentionality. Each day when we awake, it is as if Christ asks us anew, “Today what do you want me to do for you?” Each day we strive to intentionally, faithfully give Jesus our answer.

Stewardship is part of how we respond to Christ’s question. It is an intentional, thoughtful reflection about our financial resources, our sense of commitment to this congregation and its shared ministry, and our willingness to step out by faith through our contributions. That’s why all are asked to pledge. All are asked to come forward with some sort of response. It is never about the amount; it is always about the willingness to respond. Presbyterians get up and move and act with intentionality because we are called to do so by Christ.

In conclusion: Blindness is the metaphor we use for anyone choosing to stay in the dark, in the shadows of fear, inertia, despair, and cynicism. Sight is the metaphor we use for describing how Christ stands before us. Christ is our mirror and our healer, who helps us expand our vision to see the world with his eyes. Be good Presbyterians like Bartimaeus. Be gate-greeters. Shout out for justice. Get up. And honestly answer Christ’s question as you follow where he leads. Then you’ll truly see in every sense of the word. AMEN.

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Wall Street Journal, Brenda Cronin, “Some 95% of 2009-12 Gains Went to Wealthiest 1%”, Sept. 10, 2013; *A Civil American Debate* website, “The 30-year Growth of Income Inequality”, April 10, 2011.