

November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2024

*Mark 10:46-52 NRSV*

*The Healing of Blind Bartimaeus*

*They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!' Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, 'Son of David, have mercy on me!' Jesus stood still and said, 'Call him here.' And they called the blind man, saying to him, 'Take heart; get up, he is calling you.' So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. Then Jesus said to him, 'What do you want me to do for you?' The blind man said to him, 'My teacher, let me see again.' Jesus said to him, 'Go; your faith has made you well.' Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.*

All of you, I'm guessing, have heard of the sinking of the Titanic — but how many of you have heard of the H.M.S. the Empress of Ireland? The Empress of Ireland sank in the St. Lawrence River east of Québec City, near Rimouski when it was struck by another ship. It happened in the early hours of the morning on May 19<sup>th</sup>, 1914. Each ship knew the other ship was there, but a very heavy fog rolled in and the two ships became confused as to who was where. The problem was they couldn't see. It was two years after the sinking of the Titanic, and this passenger ship was equipped with all sorts of safety equipment, including enough lifeboats for every person on board. Nevertheless, the collision was catastrophic, and the Empress sank incredibly quickly.

Within 14 minutes of being struck the ship was underwater—the sleeping passengers stood no chance as the freezing waters of the St. Lawrence rushed in. 1,012 people died in Canada's biggest maritime disaster. Unlike the Titanic it was quickly forgotten, likely because World War I began just weeks later. We who live on the river and occasionally hear the ships sounding their fog horns have an idea of how dangerous it can be to have limited visibility.

The blind beggar on the side of the road in today's scripture knew about the great challenges of living without sight. His name is Bartimaeus— 'bar' means 'son of'— so he is the son of Timaeus. He's not a nobody. He has a name, and he is known. I can't help but wonder if they knew his name before, or if it became known after Jesus meets him. He had a name before, but I don't doubt that he was used to being left out, left to the side. People living with disabilities are used to being left out or forgotten.

Whether you are living with a disability now or have in the past, *my guess is that you have all experienced feeling forgotten and left out.*

I want you to imagine the incredible amount of insecurity and uncertainty that Bartimaeus likely had in his life. He never knew what the day would hold. Would it be good day, would people have mercy on him? Would it be a bad day? Would he be shoved aside, robbed, beaten up? Would he live to 'see' another day? His not being able to see created heightened insecurity and likely a life filled with fear. He had heard Jesus was coming this way, but would it make any difference at all? Even on days when he was one of the only people on the street he was often ignored, so how much more likely would that be with crowds of people?

Most of us don't know what it is like to be blind. I have learned from people who are legally blind that most blind people can see some things, but their sight is extremely limited. Maybe Bartimaeus could see something like a crowd coming his way. Likely he couldn't see Jesus or see his face. Was it kind? Was it worried or determined? Was his attention here or somewhere else?

Even fewer of us know what it would be like to have nothing and to resort to having to beg for money on the street. Sadly, we've learned a little more about people who live on the streets, because the numbers have increased so drastically. I've learned that people who have nowhere safe to sleep often spend the night walking to keep warm, and because it doesn't feel safe to fall asleep at night they often sleep in the daytime — or during the Friday breakfast or the church service (okay maybe that's the sermon's fault!) where it is warmer and safer. Which means that they can appear to be lazy or that they just don't care. It would be hard for those of us who have never been homeless — and I know some you do know something about that struggle — but it's hard for those of us who haven't experienced being precariously housed or homeless to understand the level of insecurity that this brings.

But all of us know what it is like to feel that we can't see well enough into the future. All of us know what it is like to feel insecure because of world events or things going on in our lives.

None of us knows what the results of the U.S. election will be on Tuesday. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't anxious about it. One article I read said that the entire U.S. was having a panic attack. And something like 87% think it will be a total disaster if their candidate doesn't win! That's not good. We don't know if there will be violence as a result. We don't know exactly how it will affect us in Canada, but it always does affect us.

As Pierre Trudeau famously put it, living next to the United States *"is in some ways like sleeping with an elephant. No matter how friendly and even-tempered is the beast ... one is affected by every twitch and grunt."*

What about the rest of the world? Will the war in Ukraine escalate, or the war in the Middle East? Will there be anything left of the Palestinian people? Will we have watched yet another genocide and done little?

Will the health care system be there for us when we have a crisis, or will we fall through the cracks? Will my family or friends be there for me? Will I be able to afford to live? What climate-induced natural disaster will affect us or those we know and love next? What will the world be like for my children, for your grandchildren and great-grandchildren?

When it comes to the future, we are always blind.

In the Bible when we have stories of Jesus healing blind people there is the healing of a physical condition, but there is always a sense that the blindness is more than physical.

Bartimaeus hears Jesus coming and he knows that Jesus is about to walk by. Bartimaeus is desperate not to miss him and so he does the one thing he can — he shouts out as loud as he can "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Again, he cries out, even louder: "Son of David!". It's funny because he can't see, and yet he already sees Jesus more clearly than many around him. When he uses the term 'Son of David' he is recognizing Jesus as the "Christ", as the Messiah for whom they were waiting.

Perhaps that's why Jesus heard him over the noisy crowd and stopped, looked at Bartimaeus and called him to come. All of a sudden, with Jesus' eyes on Bartimaeus the whole crowd turns and sees him too. "Take heart; get up!", they tell him. "He is calling you!"

We used to have a children's program called "Godly Play" here. The children and youth room is still called the Godly Play room and we have all the resources, but the program requires trained teachers. As some of the kids got older, (and I suppose the teachers did too!) we were no longer able to keep it going. Anyway, we had a trainer come from the UCC in Toronto with a story-based program. It trains the teachers to learn the Bible stories by heart and to tell them to the children while everyone is sitting on the floor on cushions.

The storyteller has objects to help tell the story — like a Noah's ark or a box of sand with little people who walk through the desert. One of the things we learned from the training session is that while telling the story, the storyteller needs to *keep their eyes on the story and the figures in the story*. Our normal inclination is to look at the kids or the audience, but the story tellers are trained not to look at the kids but to focus on the scene of the story they are creating in front of them. The reason is that this draws the attention of the kids away from the teacher and towards the story, helping the kids to enter into the story themselves. That's a bit of a detour but my point is that all it took for Bartimaeus to be seen by everyone was for Jesus to see him.

I'm grateful for people who draw our eyes to those Jesus would have us see more clearly. I'm grateful for people like Donna Greenhorn who draws our eyes towards Indigenous Peoples and how we can truly live our call to reconciliation. I'm grateful for those who prepare Friday Breakfast and Sunday Suppers and so draw our eyes to those who are hungry or lonely.

Of course, that works best when we have our eyes on Jesus. That crowd was all looking to Jesus. Soon the crowd will shift away and want Barabbas freed — their eyes will move to those who are in power, to save them from their own problems and fears.

But right now, their eyes are on Jesus, so they see who Jesus sees. *May we see who Jesus sees.*

"Take heart; get up", they tell him. "He is calling you!"

Bartimaeus wastes no time. He throws off his cloak —he throws off the only thing of value he has— and the thing that might slow him down. He throws off his security blanket and runs to Jesus.

Now he is right there in front of Jesus! I imagine up close the face of Jesus is a little less fuzzy, but the voice of Jesus is loud and clear. Bartimaeus hears Jesus ask him “What do you want?”

Now at this point we have to remember the story that comes right before this scripture. We talked about it 2 weeks ago. The disciples are following Jesus on the way and James and John ask Jesus to give them what they want. Jesus says to them “Tell me what you want”. Do you remember what they wanted? They wanted power and glory. They wanted security: ‘Grant us to sit at your right and at your left hand when you come into your kingdom.’ The other disciples are jealous. That’s what how the disciples answer the question: what do you want.

If Jesus were to ask you that question what would your answer be? Such a simple and incredibly difficult question.

For Bartimaeus, the answer was easy. He didn’t ask for money. He didn’t ask for glory. He didn’t ask for world peace. “Master,” he answers: “I want to see again.” “Go”, Jesus says. “Your faith has made you well.” With those simple words Bartimaeus can see again, clearly.

What does he do with that sight? I could imagine him running off to look into the faces of those he loved or to look at a beautiful place — like the sun rising over the Sea of Galilee. But Bartimaeus doesn’t do that. With his new-found sight he follows Jesus. He wants to keep seeing Jesus.

Where is he following Jesus? He doesn’t know. The future is just as hidden, just as blurry as it was when he was blind. Is he headed towards a party? Yes — a huge street party with palm branches and hosannas awaits them as they arrive in Jerusalem ... but he’s also heading to a time of unrest, arrest and horror.

What does this coming week hold for us and for our neighbours to the south? I don’t know. What will next month or next year look like for you and those you love? I don’t know.

I do know that Jesus sees you. He sees your anxiety; he sees your needs. “*Take heart— don’t be afraid; he is calling you.*” Jesus is calling you to follow him. Where is he calling you to follow? I don’t know. Just follow.

That's not true, I do know! He is calling you deeper into love. This love is so big, so true, so strong, that it transforms all things, even me and you.

*Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ...*

*No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

We don't go alone. We are following Jesus who sees what we can't see. He sees the forgotten person on the side of the road, on the other side of the world. He sees you. Even before it happens, he sees the incredible love that will be born on an ugly and terrifying cross ... a love that will set us free.

Thanks be to God!

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