

Mark 10:46-52

LET ME SEE AGAIN

A story is told of three men who arrive at heaven's gate at the same time. Upon referring to his Big Book, Saint Peter notices that all three men came from the same city. Struck by this unlikely coincidence, his curiosity is aroused. Turning to the first of the three, he says, "Forgive my curiosity, but what happened to the three of you?"

The man shrugged in reply, saying, "The last thing I remember is coming home from work to find the door to my apartment open. Several robberies had occurred in town over the last several days, so I shouted, 'I know you're in there!' and I darted into my living room. I saw nobody, but I smelled fresh cigarette smoke, so I knew I had missed the burglar by just a few seconds at the most. I dashed to the window and looked down toward the street. Sure enough, I saw a young fellow run out of the building and jump into a car. I was furious. So I turned and picked up my refrigerator and heaved it out the window toward the culprit. The last thing I remember was a sharp pain in my chest and a tingling sensation in my right arm."

"Ah, I see," said Peter. "A heart attack." Turning to the second man he said, "And what about you?" "Well," the young man replied, "I'm not sure. My wife and I had just married and moved into this new apartment. She got this craving for Chinese food, and I was so swept away in love for her that I dashed out to our car to go to the restaurant. The last thing I remember was seeing this enormous shadow cross the hood of the car, like something huge was falling straight for me."

"Ah," said St. Peter. "The refrigerator." Turning to the final prospective entrant, he asked, "And what about you, sir?" "Well," the man said sheepishly, "I was sitting, minding my own business, smoking a cigarette inside this refrigerator, when all of a sudden..." (Bruce Nettleton, *Biblical Preaching Journal*, Fall 1994, pp. 13-14)

Sometimes, in order to understand a certain story, it's necessary to know the story or stories that preceded it; then, things start to come into sharper focus as we see the big picture. That is certainly the case with our scripture lesson for today. In order to really understand and appreciate the story of Jesus healing the blind man, Bartimaeus, it is necessary to recall last Sunday's story in which James and John asked Jesus for a favor.

Perhaps you will remember that Jesus asked the two brothers, "What is it you want me to do for you?" Without hesitating, James and John said they wanted box seats – one on Jesus' right hand and one on his left – when Jesus entered into his glory. However, Jesus told them he was unable to grant their wish.

In today's story, a blind beggar by the name of Bartimaeus heard that Jesus of Nazareth was approaching. He began to shout out loud, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Despite the efforts of many to silence him, he cried out even more loudly until he got Jesus' attention. Jesus called to him and the blind beggar sprang up and stood before Jesus. Take note of the fact that Jesus asked the blind man the very same question that he posed to James and John earlier: "What do you want me to do for you?" Bartimaeus said, "Teacher, let me see again," which implies that he once had sight but now he could not see. Jesus told him to "Go, your faith has made you well" and immediately he regained his sight.

Mark told these two stories side by side in order to compare and contrast the requests made of Jesus in response to the very same question he asked both parties. In one story Jesus denied the request, while the other request was granted.

James and John's request borders on an order: "...we want you to do whatever we ask of you." By contrast, Bartimaeus called out to Jesus with a far different attitude; Bartimaeus pleaded that Jesus would show him a measure of mercy. James and John demanded what they felt they deserved. Bartimaeus expressed a heartfelt plea for what he knew he did NOT deserve.

James and John wanted positions of status and power in Jesus' coming kingdom. But their ambition had blinded them to the road of suffering and sorrow that Jesus would have to travel in order to bring in the kingdom of God. In a very real sense, James and John as well as the other ten disciples were spiritually blind.

Although Bartimaeus was physically blind, he was spiritually perceptive. Bartimaeus asked for his sight and, by his subsequent actions, we understand that Bartimaeus saw more into the nature of true discipleship than Jesus' first called disciples. Immediately after Jesus told Bartimaeus, "Go; your faith has made you well," Bartimaeus regained his sight and followed Jesus on the way – the way to the cross and empty tomb.

Most of the people healed by Jesus in the gospels fade into anonymity. However, this blind man is different from the others because we are told his name – why? – because Bartimaeus stands out as a model for true discipleship. Bartimaeus reminds us to be "people that are not too proud to ask for mercy, people who are 'saved by faith,' and people who follow Jesus on the way to the cross." (Mark I. Wegener)

Bartimaeus helps us to understand that Christianity is all about following Jesus, giving our lives fully to Jesus, and stumbling after him along the way as best we can. We follow Jesus because he is the One, who can and does save us from our sinful selves. If we will follow in Jesus' footsteps, he will lead us and show us a better way of being human in this world. If we say to Jesus in all sincerity, "Lord, let me see again," Jesus will open our blind eyes to see the world through the eyes of God. When Jesus restores our sight so that we once more focus on God's will and way in the world, like Bartimaeus before us, we will alter our lives and do things differently.

This Reformation Sunday reminds us anew that we are saved by the grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ and not through any merit on our part. At the same time, we are both saved from sin and we are saved for good works. We are both forgiven and given new opportunities to participate with our Lord in his ongoing ministry in the world.

We rejoice that we can support (with our benevolence dollars) Citizens Against Family Violence, Community Storehouse, Habitat for Humanity, Free Medical Clinic, Stepping Stones, and Teamwork Ministries along with other institutions and agencies. We are grateful for the work that they do and the people they help, and we are glad to help fund their compassionate outreach to others.

We also recognize that we are called to follow Jesus on the way and do our part to help him help others. Whatever our individual gift or gifts, all gifts are necessary and vital so that God's kingdom might come on earth as it is in heaven.

James Howell writes about an unexpected fruit of his church's hosting the community homelessness program one evening. His associate pastor came into the sanctuary while a homeless woman was praying and sobbing. She finally shouted toward the ceiling, "God, can't you tell we need some help down here?" As is so often the case,

God responded through God's church. A lawyer in the congregation helped her get some money that was owed to her. The owner of some apartment buildings got her lodging. A dentist helped with teeth, a tutor helped her children get ready for school, and a businessman came forth to offer her a job.

What is God wanting us to do? Where and to whom is God's Spirit leading us to engage others in Christ's ministry? There is plenty to do as we follow Jesus, and God has seen to it that there are numerous gifts to go around the church in order to get the job done. May our prayer be: Lord Jesus, let us see again and again and again what the needs are; and then, help us to go to work as we envision new ways of doing ministry for both you and those in need. Grant that we will do our part to "share God's love, embrace our neighbor, and nurture each other" – all to the glory of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Randall C. Stevens
First Presbyterian Church/Martinsville, VA
October 25, 2009