



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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The Second St. Bart

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, October 25, 2015

The Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost—Based on Mark 10:46-52

On my route to the church from my apartment, it is a common thing for me to see the occasional blind person. There are two in particular that I recognize. They are, unfortunately, objects of fascination for me. Although I know that my fascination is just plain rude. I gawk more than I should, when I really should consider striking up conversation. I remain impressed by their ability to navigate the city with a white stick and a careful stride. And, yet, I have to pinch myself and remember the frustration of my blind classmate at college. He who could join me in a play, he found such commendations frustrating and condescending. Only toddlers should be praised for walking and talking. We all adapt. Some adaptations are not so visible as others. The blind are not separate from common humanity. And so the moral learning continues. But this takes seeing things in a completely new way. If you have any hope of being friends with a blind person, you have to be delivered from an inner blindness of your own. And that includes, for example, easily equating blindness with ignorance. Even some of our best lines do this. "I once was lost, and now am found. Was blind but now I see." Our metaphors could conspire against dignity and relationship, couldn't they? There are so many cultural and prejudicial obstacles to cross, even now, when it comes to those who are differently-abled. The landscape of emotions and identity politics and language is not for the faint of heart. And, as with all of us, every personal relationship defies generalization. But if that landscape is traversed with compassion, a listening ear, and some measure of outright silence from the privileged, there is such promise for restoring the dignity of every person, and the joys that can come from that.

But the reading from the Gospel for today has little interest in navigating this particular territory. In fact, it seems to be practically regressive. In it, Bartimaeus, the blind beggar of Jericho, is able to see again because of his faith in Christ. It is Sundays like this that I hope there is no one blind in the room, because the surface reading is so very problematic in our time. I can't preach with a straight face that this is how God reliably functions in the world, that prayer and faith will act as a kind of divine spell to get those cones and rods going again. I don't believe the church, or even God, to be in the business of optic nerve restoration. But here it is. Also you find such accounts in every Gospel, no less. And throughout the Bible, a key image of salvation and the Messiah's coming involved the lame walking and the blind able to see. This activity was an essential aspect of what made Jesus so popular in his ministry. So what are we to make in our time of all of these blind people who receive sight to follow Jesus on the way?

Well, let us consider Bartimaeus: not only blind, but a beggar on the road leading out of Jericho. His life was one of destitute poverty, scrounging in the thoroughfare. He had returned to the dust before his time. Perhaps his cloak was his only home? He would have been known by everyone coming and going from the city. And yet he was likely to have been among the most reviled. Back then, blindness was little understood. Perhaps it was contagious? Or, even more likely, according to the wisdom of the day, perhaps it was a legacy of sin that had allowed such a fate to strike him. Perhaps it was his parents? Who knew? At the very least, it wouldn't be worth the risk to associate with him, unless you wanted to feel a measure of self-congratulation by throwing a coin on his cloak. It was a wonder that this non-person had survived this long.

Jesus had a knack for making a splash, and surely Bartimaeus would have heard stories about this itinerant rabbi. He would have heard the catchy and funny parables. And so when Jesus passes by on his road, Bartimaeus cries out to him. And you can just feel the fury in this reading of the people surrounding Jesus, likely even the disciples. "How dare this horrible, disgusting person address our Lord directly! Go back to your ditch." This is so similar to the

disciples trying to keep the children away from Jesus earlier in the chapter. They are still serving as a stumbling block in front of the “little ones.” But their contemptuous folly doesn’t work. Because Bartimaeus’ voice pierces the air and outmaneuvers the gatekeepers. It is not only the volume that reaches Jesus, but the brilliant insight. Coming from this humble place, it must have taken Jesus’ breath away. Bartimaeus, the beggar, perceives a reality that even the disciples haven’t perceived. He may not be able to see his own hand. But he can somehow see the hand of God moving in the world. He screams over the crowd “Have mercy on me, Son of David!” This is a big deal! This lowly beggar perceives that Jesus of Nazareth is more than what he seems. Bartimaeus proclaims him as the Messiah, the one who delivers us from bondage somehow. And not only that, Bartimaeus sees that Jesus isn’t a warlike Messiah dispensing worldly glory for which the disciples are jockeying. He is, instead, a Messiah of mercy and holy blessing and healing. Earlier in the Gospel, there is a rich man who can’t follow Jesus because he can’t leave his possessions behind. That is no difficulty for Bartimaeus, who casts off his cloak to personally meet Jesus on the road. It’s an amazing sign of his priority. Nothing is an obstacle for him when it comes to seeking God and that mercy. And on top of that, he outshines the disciples James and John. When they are asked by Jesus, “What do you want me to do for you?” they are most concerned with status and glory, asking to be his right hand men. But when Jesus asks Bartimaeus, “What do you want me to do for you?” he has the simple request, “Rabbi, let me see again.” Nothing flashy, but real and practical. And connected to the deep historical hope of the Scripture for the whole world. In a way saying, “Equip me, Lord, to see life anew, and make me part of your salvation of all Creation.” And he is able to see again.

But Jesus in no way takes credit: “Go,” he says, “your faith and trust and devotion have made you well.” Whatever happened to Bartimaeus, it wasn’t God’s direct doing. It was Bartimaeus summoning his strength to receive what was in store for him from God. He healed himself, somehow. And the result of that healing was Bartimaeus leaving his miserable life in the dirt behind, to become a follower of Jesus, one of the select few to be enshrined in the Gospels by name.

I think we can get distracted from the heart of the Bartimaeus account if we focus on the suspension of scientific law or if we fret too much about the disability politics. These concerns are there, and real. And this doesn’t get us off the hook of struggling with them.

But the heart of the account is to lift up Bartimaeus as a spiritual hero for all of us. An unexpected exemplar of faith and wisdom, trumping so many who came before him, even the disciples. And we are meant to be surprised by Bartimaeus so that we are never surprised again. So that we might always remember that the surface appearance is never an indicator of what is going on in the heart and soul. The seen is a poor vista for the unseen. Bartimaeus is meant to open our eyes to the promise that is there for all people, no matter how we might think them meek or suspect, to pursue God, to nail it, and then follow the call for the rest of their days. You just never know. Maybe you can start to see God moving in ways that you never thought possible, and follow that movement for the rest of your days. If Bartimaeus can do it, this second St. Bart, if he can do it, maybe you can, too.