



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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OCTOBER 25, 2015
REFORMATION SUNDAY

Re-formed
Jeremiah 31:31-34; Mark 10:46-52

Faith can be powerful. Faith can be life-changing. Faith can be frightening. That is what the experience of Bartimaeus tells us.

Those of you who watch “The Voice” on Monday and Tuesday nights know that one of the contestants is a very talented country singer named “Blind Joe.” Many country, jazz and blues musicians have nicknames such as Boxcar Willie, Tennessee Ernie Ford, Satchmo, and Muddy Waters. Those nicknames are part of the culture of the music. “Blind Joe,” as all his friends and family call him, was born premature and went blind after birth, but his blindness did not hinder him from fully experiencing life. He learned to play the guitar from his grandfather. He made his way through school, married, teaches the use of technology to other people with physical and mental challenges, and enjoys dirt bikes. “Blind Joe” has found other ways to “see” the world and fully participate in it.

I don’t know if the son of Timaeus, who appears in today’s Gospel lesson, was a musician, but he has been known throughout history as “Blind Bartimaeus.” The truth us that he has been more familiar around the world and across time than any musical star with a catchy name.

As Mark tells the story, Bartimaeus was sitting by the road outside Jericho as Jesus and his entourage passed by. He had apparently heard about this teacher who performed miracles and just might be the Messiah, so he began to yell, “Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me!” Some of the folks around him told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the louder. This was perhaps his one chance at healing and he could not be silent. Jesus called for him and asked what he wanted. Bartimaeus begged, “My teacher, let me see again.” Jesus’ reply was simple yet astonishing: “Go, your faith has made you well.”

I doubt Bartimaeus had any idea what a profound theological statement he had made when he cried out to Jesus. As a Hebrew, he did know that the derivation of the name for Jesus was a form of the name Joshua which means, “he saves.” To refer to Jesus as the “son of David” connected him to

Israel's greatest king and the one whose descendant would be the Messiah. Bartimaeus' request to be made well was an affirmation that he believed Jesus had the ability and compassion to heal a blind man. He put everything on the line to risk being healed. Jesus declared that Bartimaeus was made whole by the power of his faith. The former beggar got up and immediately followed Jesus. It was a life-changing experience.

When Saul was on his mission to rid the world of followers of Christ, he, too, encountered Jesus. He was on his way to Damascus and the vision of the risen Christ so stunned him that he was blind. He was led to a believer named Ananias who explained to him that Jesus was indeed the Messiah. Paul believed, was given new sight, and began to share the Good News of Jesus Christ throughout the known world. Faith is powerful. Faith is life-changing. Faith can be frightening.

Martin Luther was a bright young man growing up in fifteenth century Germany. He was studious and inquisitive. His father, a miner, recognized his potential and sent him to study law at the University of Erfurt. While there, he was caught in a severe thunderstorm and afraid for his life. As many of us do when we are in a tight spot, he cried out for help. He appealed to St. Anne, the mother of Mary and patron saint of miners, to intercede with God for him. Luther promised that if he lived he would become a monk. He survived and kept his promise, though he struggled as a monk and eventually studied theology at the University of Wittenburg and became a professor there.

Luther was tormented by inadequacy and guilt and terrified of God's wrath. His studies, however, led him to an understanding that our salvation comes by grace through faith and not through our works or merit. It was as if scales had fallen off the eyes of his faith and he could see anew the true mercy of God. His revitalized faith was characterized by a sense of freedom and responsibility. He was free to explore scripture, to raise questions about his faith, and to wonder about the ways in which we live out our faith. He also felt a responsibility to invite other people into the conversation he was having about faith. Luther began to question some of the practices of his beloved Church. He witnessed excesses and deceit in Rome and neglect and abuse of the peasants in the parishes throughout Christendom. He felt that something must be done to bring healing and wholeness to the faith.

On All Hallows' Eve, 1517, Martin Luther attached a list of discussion points to the door of the Wittenburg Church which served as a community

billboard. It was never Luther's intention to ignite a schism in the Church; rather, he wanted to spark conversation over what he saw as excesses and abuses and the need for reform. Nevertheless, the 95 Theses, as Luther's document came to be known, enraged church officials in Rome and resulted in an intense investigation of his theology and his eventual excommunication from the Church. The Reformation, though never his desire, was the result.

Luther never wanted to split the Church. He loved the Roman Catholic Church which had nurtured him all of his life, but he could not tolerate some of its practices. He wanted to talk, to discuss matters of great spiritual importance, and to come to a place where a new understanding—new vision—of faith would guide the Church and her people in the days to come. Luther discovered the simplicity of faith and the power it holds to reform our lives and make us whole again.

Bartimaeus, the Apostle Paul, and Luther all remind us that our faith is not something God doles out to us and we tuck away for safekeeping. Faith is vibrant and risky. It chooses to see the world as it is and as it can be. It chooses to live and experience the fullness of God's grace. Our faith should enable us to see the world in fresh ways and to become free to dialogue, explore, and serve with one another. Faith ought to be an experience and process of constantly being re-formed.

This past week we have heard much about the decades-old struggle over control of the Temple Mount area of Jerusalem. The site of the second temple in Jerusalem and believed to be the place where Abraham nearly sacrificed his son Isaac, that piece of real estate is considered holy by Jews, Muslims, and Christians. Yet, anger, violence, politics, and hatred have swirled over and around the place for years. At the core of the issue are Jews and Muslims, cousins in the faith, who both want control of the area. They are cousins because both trace their spiritual as well as physical lineage back to Abraham, the father of our faith, who responded to God's call to go into a new land and be a blessing to all the peoples of the world. This God—our God—desires nothing but wholeness for all of his children. Yet, his children are blind to their kinship and ignorant of the power of their faith to resolve their issues and live peacefully together.

This power is not limited to the Middle East, however. If we called upon God to open our eyes to the realities of the world, what might we see? What questions might arise about our understanding of faith? What opportunities might we see for the expression of our faith in the world? What might we be

invited to do in our own community, in our own neighborhood? Would we, like Bartimaeus, Paul, and Luther, see life in a new light and willingly follow Christ wherever he leads us?

In recent months we have seen Pope Francis institute a new dialogue about faith in the world as he has embraced people of all faiths and called them to the table to discuss what faith truly means to all of us. He has initiated dialogue within his own expression of faith and has shown the courage to talk about faith and changes of faith without fear that God will be displeased with our conversations. Instead, he has realized that God welcomes those conversations and the questions that result from them. He has recognized the power of faith to bring us together rather than tear us apart.

After all, the power of faith is the ability to see the world and one another in new ways. The freedom of faith is the opportunity to question and explore, to dialogue with one another about the meaning and purpose of our faith. And the fear of our faith is the reality that it can indeed change the world. Ask Bartimaeus. Ask Paul. Ask Luther what happens when we allow our faith to thrive. We are re-formed and the world around us changes. That is God's way in the world.

Centuries before Bartimaeus was healed, before Saul met Christ and was converted, and before Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the church door, the prophet Jeremiah spoke on behalf of God and said, "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more" (Jeremiah 31:31, 33b-34).

Reformation in its truest sense is being re-formed by the Spirit of God so that faith in God is not something we simply know; rather, faith becomes the way in which we see life and live. Faith is an eye-opening experience of the freedom and responsibility to participate with God in the world. It is not something that happens one time and is over. Coming to faith is an ongoing experience of God's grace.

Are you willing to be re-formed? Will you ask God to open your eyes to life as God has created it? Are you willing to risk what God might do and where God might lead? May God take our current blindness whatever that might be and re-form us into people who see as God sees and act as God acts. Amen.

October 25, 2015

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

How good it is to hear again the generosity of your mercy, O God, and to be reminded of the responsibility we bear as children of your grace. Take the quill of your Holy Spirit and inscribe your divine insights on our hearts, we pray. Transfer your holy desires into our minds. Lead us in the way you want us to go and make our lives a sacred beacon of your grace.

Like this little one whom we have committed to your safekeeping, enable us to recognize our dependence upon you and one another. Strengthen the ties which bind us together and increase our awareness of our importance to one another. Enable us to do what we can to care for one another and enlarge our capacity to help our sisters and brothers, we pray.

As we recall the specific needs of our friends, we pray that you will guide us to help meet those needs. Bless all who care for us in specific ways and bless the means they use to aid our healing of body, mind, and spirit. Keep our hopes from waning and lift our spirits to a new height of confidence in your abiding grace. Because we cannot directly change the harm that is being done throughout the world, we pray that you will stir the hearts of those men and woman who can stop the atrocities of terrorism, war, greed, and self-hatred. Bring resources to people in desperate need of medical care, food, housing, and peace. Help us to realize the things we can do to change life for the better in our community.

Create within us a new heart and a new spirit, O God. Continue the grand experiment that we call humanity and guide us to live in a way that is truly pleasing to you. Heal our blindness, we pray, and allow us to follow in the path of your footsteps, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.