

October 21, 2018

22nd Sunday after Pentecost

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When you compare the story of Bartimaeus with the stories that come before it in the gospel of Mark, the first thing that might stand out is that nothing goes wrong. Nobody is confused about Jesus' identity. The disciples don't get in the way of Jesus' work. There isn't anyone trying to stop Jesus or trick him or arrest him. Think about it. The gospels for the past several weeks have been chock full of people challenging Jesus about his work. He gets backtalk from the disciples and worse from the Jewish leaders. So, this story is a bit odd.

It's also a transitional point in Jesus' story. With the telling of this story, Mark ends his narrative of Jesus' ministry and moves to talking about Jesus' journey to Jerusalem and the cross.

We don't often read the story of Bartimaeus as a part of worship because most of the time it is the reading for the last Sunday in October – and as Lutherans, we usually use the lessons for Reformation Sunday instead of the story of Bartimaeus. But we decided to mix things up a little and read his story today. And I was kind of excited to have something a little less familiar to preach on until sometime on Wednesday when a friend posted this quote,

“Yes, I know you meant it metaphorically, but it's not very nice to be regarded as a metaphor for sin or unbelief.” - John Hull

I had never heard of John Hull, but I found myself wanting to know more. His words stuck to me. And so, God love Google, I looked him up. I learned that Hull was a professor of Religious Education and Practical Theology at the University of Birmingham in England. When he was 13 he developed cataracts. By the early 1960s he was a doctoral student in his twenties. He could still read with the aid of magnifiers and would walk to work following the yellow lines in the street. He had issues with retinal detachment and despite several surgeries, his vision continued to deteriorate. By the time he was 45 he had lost all his vision and could no longer perceive any light. It was then that Hull realized he was no longer just a visitor to the condition of blindness. He said, "I had taken up residence in another world." His book, *Touching the Rock*, which comes from his diaries in those years, is thought to be one of the most compelling books to reflect on the process of becoming blind.

In a 2013 interview written when he was in his 70s, Hull said, "In the English language - and, I believe, in most languages - the word "blindness" is used as a negative metaphor, suggesting insensitivity, ignorance, clumsiness, and lack of discrimination. This negative language is also found in the Bible and has come into our hymn books and our daily speech."

He said that he didn't think the Church was any better or worse than most of society, but here's the part that has stuck with me. Hull said, "I read the stories about Christ healing the blind with annoyance. Blindness is associated with sin, unbelief, and darkness. When your blindness is removed, you become a follower of Jesus. The healing miracles are bad examples of how the Church should treat blind people today. After all, there were no blind people among the disciples of Jesus."

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It is so tempting to think of Bartimaeus' story as being just one more healing story. He was blind and then thanks to Jesus, he can see. Ta da! "His faith made him well!" But there's always more to the story when you're talking about Jesus and I think that John Hull's words can drive us to go deeper in our exploration of this story. So, if Bartimaeus story isn't just about a blind man seeing, what is it about?

In the final verse of the reading, Jesus names "faith" as what drives Bartimaeus and the rest of the story, what comes before and after, shows us what that faith is. Matt Skinner wrote, "Bartimaeus' faith is not about reciting the correct confession or subscribing to certain dogmas. It is his unrelenting conviction that Jesus can and will [do something.]"

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So, here's the first thing to consider about Bartimaeus. He gets who Jesus is. In the nine and a half chapters leading up to this story, not one other person has been able to understand so much about Jesus with so little data. Bartimaeus calls Jesus "Son of David" - no one else in Mark's version of the story, calls Jesus by this name. Bartimaeus sees Jesus as being God's designated messenger. He is the one, chosen by God - just as David was chosen to lead his people.

The title also introduces the idea that Jesus is a royal figure. Blind or not, Bartimaeus understands the royal dimensions of Jesus' identity. And this identity will be a central part of the story when Jesus triumphantly arrives in Jerusalem. And when he is crucified as "king of the Jews."

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The second thing about Bartimaeus is that he persists, no matter what. In Mark's telling of the gospel, faith doesn't come easily to people. There are quite often tremendous obstacles to interacting with Jesus, like having to take the roof off the house to lower a paralyzed man down to see him. Or there's the story of the Syrophenician woman who has a whole debate with Jesus in which he basically calls her a dog, before he agrees to care for her daughter. And of course, the disciples get in the way more often than not, acting as Jesus security detail or personal handlers.

Bartimaeus, gets shushed because he's in danger of making a scene, but when people tell him to quiet down, he just gets louder. He is determined to meet Jesus. Even though people are actively trying to keep him away from Jesus, he keeps at it and that's because he expects to be transformed. He expects Jesus to do something.

And so, he demands mercy.

People who came to Jesus often wanted things. The rich young man wanted eternal life, the disciples wanted power and glory, but this guy, blind and parked on the roadside, only asks for mercy. He doesn't even specify what kind of mercy.

Jesus tells the crowd to go call Bartimaeus over. Which they do and Bartimaeus gets up and tosses aside his cloak. This is clear evidence that he believes Jesus is going to change his life. Otherwise, why would a man who is begging for every penny, abandon one of his few possessions? He expects that his life will change and from here on out, he won't have to sit on that cloak, begging for people to give him a handout. Things are going to be different.

And here's the fourth thing about his Bartimaeus. He's ready to interact with Jesus, so when Jesus asks Bartimaeus, "What do you want me to do for you?" his reply is a simple request, spoken with confidence that Jesus can get it done. "Teacher, I'd like to have my sight back." He believes. He has faith that Jesus, the Son of David, the Messiah, will have mercy on him. And so, he asks for his sight to be returned. And with no fuss at all -no spit- no mud – no washing in special waters- Jesus restores his sight. But then comes the tricky part – the part that John Hull disliked. "Your faith has made you well." Jesus says or more literally, "Your faith has saved you."

Hull didn't see his blindness as a sign of brokenness that needed fixing. Or as something from which he needed to be saved. He said "My works, are, in a way, a yearning to overcome the abyss which divides blind people from sighted people. In seeking to overcome that abyss I've emphasized the uniqueness of the blind condition—blindness is a world. I've also sought to show that it's one of a number of human worlds. That sight is also a world. And that to gain our full humanity, blind people and sighted people need each other."

He also said, "Becoming blind has given me a sense of solidarity with other marginalized minorities. I have become more conscious of human suffering. This has changed my theology profoundly, since I tend to start from pain rather than from historic revelation."

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Mark may have intended this story to be about a blind man who gets his sight back. After all, his community believed that disabilities were caused by sin. But given what we know about blindness and sight marginalizing others - I think it's important to see more than just a healing story. So, here's the fifth good thing about Bartimaeus.

He is not the first person who approaches Jesus in faith, asking for mercy, but he is the only one who winds up following him. After ten chapters full of so much secrecy, confusion, and misapprehension, Bartimaeus shows Mark's readers that faith in Jesus is possible. There are so many people who get it wrong in Mark's telling. Even the ending falls short. Easter happens. Jesus rises from the dead and the only witnesses to the resurrection run away in fear and according to Mark, tell nothing to nobody.

Bartimaeus and John Hull, are both examples of what it is to believe fiercely. Neither one let the circumstances of their life stifle or extinguish their faith. To describe the gospel story as "the healing of blind Bartimaeus" is to miss the best part of what happens. To describe John Hull in terms of his blindness is to miss his story altogether. He once said, "Just remember, blindness is only my hobby: it's not my work.

Hull's words can help us see Bartimaeus more fully and with more depth. His story is incredible not because he gets his sight back. It's incredible, because he is so willing to believe! With very little experience of Jesus – he has faith! And he acts based on that belief. And he trusts because of that belief. And his faith – his relationship with Jesus – changes his life.

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In my first congregation, one of the members was a former missionary to Madagascar. Renie, her husband and their five children spent much of their lives in Africa, serving in various ways through

the Lutheran Church. One of the things I learned from Renie has to do with prayer. Renie always prayed very specific prayers and so one time when they needed to buy a truck, to ship to Madagascar, Renie and her son started off the morning with prayer. They told God that they needed to find a pick-up that was in good shape, without too much mileage and it had to be less than \$6,000. Sure enough, by lunchtime they had found the truck. You could say it was a coincidence, but Renie was very firm in her belief that God had answered her prayer.

Bartimaeus dared to be very specific with Jesus about what he needed and wanted. All too often we offer prayers that are general and really don't say much of anything. But today's gospel can be a challenge to tell God exactly what's going on. Lean into that relationship and God will answer you.

God always answers, but the answer isn't always "yes." Sometimes the answer is "maybe," and sometimes it's "not now." And sometimes the answer is "no," but God listens to our prayers, so dare to pray specific prayers, knowing that you may not get what you ask for – but God will not leave you forsaken or alone. Engaging in conversation with Jesus is life changing.