

“Believing Is Seeing”—Mark 10:46-52

I’ve told you before about my friend Jake, who has gone on to be with the Lord. Jake was legally blind. The darkness hadn’t closed in upon his eyes completely, and it never did. There was some hope that Jake would regain some of his sight through surgery, but it was all for naught. Yet Jake refused to give in to the gradually growing darkness; he refused to succumb to the despair and hopelessness that can easily accompany going blind. And because he refused to surrender to his blindness, Jake learned to “see,” so to speak—to see many things that we who have our vision cannot or choose not to see.

For instance, in a crowd of less than twenty people, Jake could tell you within one how many were there – an amazing feat, I thought, until Jake explained to me that it was a simple matter of keeping track of how many different voices he heard. (When there were more than twenty, however, he started to lose track.) As long as no one moved the furniture, Jake could maneuver around his house and around his church and even around his neighborhood. His cane was a great help, of course, but he had mapped out in his mind the lay of the land, so to speak, and he knew precisely how many steps it took to get from one point to another. Yet he was not too proud to ask for literal guidance when he was in an unfamiliar place. Jake was an avid reader before his sight began to leave him, but he didn’t give up books—he just changed media. He listened to books on tape, and he could and would discuss with you at great length the books he had “read,” so to speak. All in all, I was amazed at what my friend Jake could see without seeing.

There’s a story in the New Testament about a man who saw without seeing, a man who, though blind, could see more about Jesus in a single encounter than could those who had their sight and who had been with Jesus for some time. Let’s listen to the way Mark, the gospel writer, tells the story:

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.

Now, we’ve often heard that “seeing is believing”—but what I’d like to suggest this morning is that blind Bartimaeus teaches us something else. I’d like to suggest this morning that he shows us that “believing is seeing.”

For one thing, believing is seeing Jesus for who he really is!

Everyone had been talking about Jesus of Nazareth: the disciples who had followed him longer than anyone, the crowds who had been with him in his journey toward Jerusalem, even those who had gotten only the advance word on his coming. Everyone knew him as “Jesus of Nazareth”—for he had gained a reputation as a teacher and preacher and even as a healer. They heard what he said; they saw what he did—but even with their open eyes, they couldn’t see Jesus for who he really was. Even the disciples, who had been with him the longest and who had even confessed him to be the Messiah, couldn’t see the truth.

But blind Bartimaeus could. Even with his eyes closed, the gift of faith allowed him to see—to see that Jesus was more than just the preacher-teacher-healer from Nazareth. Bartimaeus called him “Jesus, Son of David”—the blind man could see Jesus as Messiah, the Savior, the Anointed One of God, the One sent from God to set all things right, the One who would bring justice and mercy and God’s peace to Israel. Bartimaeus knew through the gift of faith that this Jesus was more than any ordinary human being—even though he was blind, he could see Jesus for who he truly was.

Believing calls us today to see for Jesus for who he truly is. More than a myth, more than a legend, more than a figure from the past, Jesus is the Son of God. More than a great teacher, more than someone whose words are to be mined for whatever relevant tidbits we might find, he is the Savior of the world. More than a great moral example, more than someone who might be grouped with Confucius and the Buddha and the other great teachers of the world, he is the One who gave his life as a ransom for many. He is the One who gave his life on the cross of Calvary, that you and I might find forgiveness of our sin, reconciliation with God and with one another, and everlasting life in a relationship with God that begins now and lasts forever. Believing is seeing Jesus for who he really is.

Believing is also seeing that Jesus loves us!

As Jesus and his entourage left Jericho, on their way to Jerusalem, somebody who was nobody called out to the Son of David. As a blind man, Bartimaeus was economically challenged—since he couldn’t work, all he could do was beg. He was a religious outcast, since his handicap barred him from Temple worship. Besides, the prevailing theology of the day branded him a sinner, for his

blindness was obviously God's punishment for his sins. And since Bartimaeus was an economic and religious outcast, he was obviously a social outcast. In fact, the identity by which we know him was not even his name—"Bartimaeus" is simply a designation which means "Son of Timaeus." Somebody who was nobody called to Jesus from the side of the road from Jericho to Jerusalem.

And everybody treated him like a nobody. "Hush!" they said. "Don't bother Jesus. Can't you see he's a busy man? Can't you see he's on the way to Jerusalem? Can't you see that he doesn't have time for the likes of you? Be quiet!" they all said to the blind man.

All of them, that is, except Jesus. The Scripture says that he "stood still." Jesus had a date with destiny in Jerusalem, to be sure—for there he would be delivered into the hands of those who would kill him. But that could wait for a few minutes—Jerusalem and the cross would still be there. But here was a child of Abraham, a child of God, crying out in need, and Jesus stopped to hear the blind man and meet his need before continuing on the journey. What awaited him was important enough, but not so important that he couldn't stop to bring God's healing to a suffering human being.

The Scriptures tell us, and rightly so, that Jesus died for the sins of the whole world. The Bible tells us that God's grace—God's unearned, undeserved love made real in Jesus—is available to all who will accept it. But the Scriptures also tell us that not only is God's love for all of us *together*, but it's also for each one of us *individually*. It doesn't matter who we are or aren't, what we may or may not have, what we know or don't know, whom we know or don't know—whether we're a somebody or a nobody, God loves each of us. Somebody has suggested that if Jesus were to walk the aisles of this sanctuary and the halls of our church, he would stop for each one of us, knowing us by name, knowing our need, and seeking to bring God's healing and wholeness to the places in our lives where we are battered and bruised and broken and bleeding. Jesus is not so busy saving the world that he doesn't have the time to save each one of us, personally and individually. Believing is seeing that Jesus loves you and me and each of us as individuals.

But believing is also seeing that Jesus sets us free from that which binds us and keeps us from being all that he calls us to be!

When Bartimaeus called out to Jesus, he was brought to Jesus and asked by him, "What do you want me to do for you?" Bartimaeus replied, "I want to see again." Immediately the blind man's eyes were opened—he was set free not only from his blindness, but also from the economic deprivation and religious and social estrangement he had known. Bartimaeus could now become the person God had meant him to be.

What is it that's holding us back from being the people God means for us to be? Is it sin in our lives, battling the transformation God is working in us through his Holy Spirit? Are there people whom we need to forgive? Are there grudges we need to let go? Are there people from whom we need to ask forgiveness? Is there some pain in our lives, some sickness of body or spirit, that's keeping us from the wholeness God wants for our lives? I don't know what's holding you back—to be honest, I'm not always sure what's holding *me* back from being all God wants me to be! But this I believe—if we're willing to claim and name our pain and lay it before Jesus, he will give us the healing for it he wants us to have. Perhaps the healing will be what we call “miraculous”—perhaps he will do what everyone says cannot be done. Maybe the healing is found in doing something—like going to the doctor, or granting forgiveness or seeking forgiveness or making some lifestyle changes. Or maybe the healing is found in accepting God's strength and peace for the load which we must bear. I'm not presumptuous enough to dictate what God just has to do in every situation. But I believe that God's healing and wholeness are available to us, if we're willing to open up ourselves to him. Believing is seeing that Jesus sets us free from that which binds us.

But, finally, believing is also seeing that Jesus sets us free to follow him!

After Bartimaeus received his sight, he rejoiced, to be sure—wouldn't you? But then the Scripture tells us that he followed Jesus “on the way.” That way, as we've already noted, was the way to Jerusalem and the cross. This healing just outside Jericho is the last one recorded before Jesus entered the city of Jerusalem in what we call the “Triumphal Entry,” and this man who received his sight followed Jesus. We don't hear anything else about him—all we know is that he becomes a disciple: he followed Jesus “on the way,” not only on the road to Jerusalem, but also on the path of serving God. Yet he did so with joy, responding to the grace of God which had given him sight and set him free.

When Jesus sets us free, he also places a call on our lives. He invites us to respond to his love and mercy and grace by serving him. He invites us to take upon ourselves the yoke of servanthood, not to earn his love—for that's already given. Rather, he invites us to walk in his steps, to follow in the path of the One who came not to be served but to serve, in joyous response, as a thanksgiving for what he's done in our lives. He invites us to follow him “on the way”—on the way of serving God by serving others. What form that service may take in your life, I cannot say. That's something we can work out together as the community of faith, as brothers and sisters in Jesus who are helping and encouraging each other to live as Christians. But this I do know—the call of Jesus is there, and he invites us to answer it with the joy of a heart and a life set free by his love, mercy, and grace. Believing is seeing that Jesus sets us free to follow him.

Well, it's true in some things that "seeing is believing"—we have to see it to believe it. But when it comes to matters of the Spirit, blind Bartimaeus teaches us that "believing is seeing." May the Holy Spirit open our eyes, that we may see and believe the truth about the love of Jesus for you, for me, and for every person in the whole wide world. Thanks be to God!