

How Eager Are You?

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Text: Mark 10:36-42

The story of faith begins in darkness. The story of faith begins in emptiness. The story of faith begins with raw need.

I was twenty-four, a seminary student, steeped in the rational world of systematic theology. And yet I knew that I was a sham. Though I could talk about Jesus, I could think about Jesus, I did not know Jesus. And so my faith was dead. Then one Sunday I stood up to read the morning Scripture lesson—and finally my cold heart lit up. Finally I was feeling something about God. But the something was anger.

You see, the passage that I had been asked to read was from Genesis 3. You remember the story. Since Adam and Eve could not accept God as the boss of the universe, God cursed all of us—forever. And women were particularly cursed—punished with excruciating pain in childbirth, punished with eternal subjection to the whim and the power of their husbands. “Hogwash!” is what my spirit said as I sat down after reading this text. And then, for the rest of the service, I retreated into a private hell. I painfully rejected this punishing God. And I turned away from the God I had carried with me since childhood. Tears streamed down my face and I scraped out of my heart any vestige of affection or need for God. My anger turned into emptiness. Then my emptiness turned into grief. And finally, I was left with terror. *Now* who was I? *Now* what did I have to live for?

And then, in the darkness, in the emptiness, in the raw utter need of that moment, a rich, warm voice spoke silently, and personally, to me. “If anyone is in Christ, that person is a new creation, the old is past and gone, and the new has come.” And I saw a vision of a new heaven and a new earth—a fresh start in my soul and in the soul of God’s world. Punishment was transformed into opportunity. Judgment was transformed into grace. And my blind heart was healed.

Today the story of the blind beggar begins in darkness. It begins in emptiness. And it begins in raw need. And as such, this son of “honor”—which is what the name Bartimaeus means—offers us a portrait of faith.

And this is what faith looks like. Faith is needy. Faith is eager. Faith is assertive. Faith is honest. Faith is hopeful. Faith is impetuous and persistent and risky and raw. Faith is personal and relational. Faith ends something. And faith begins something. Faith is about God doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves. And faith is about us, out of dumbstruck gratitude, doing for God what only we can do. And, most of all, faith leads us to places we would just as soon not go.

As usual, the language of Mark’s gospel is lean and muscular. And once again Mark cuts to the

heart of the matter—no fuss, no frills, no fluff. The energy of Mark’s text puts us to shame—those of us who are cool, careful Protestants—those of us who cringe at raucous Christian music and emotional Christian witness. Listen to the words describing Bartimaeus: he begs, he shouts, he shouts even louder, he jumps up, he throws off, and immediately he follows—he follows this crazy Jesus all the way to the cross. No, there is nothing cool and careful about Bartimaeus. There is nothing proper or pious or proud. There is no mirage of self-sufficiency to distance him from Jesus. There is just uppity, persistent, passionate need. And in offering that need assertively and eagerly to Jesus, Bartimaeus finds purpose. He finds faith. He finds new life.

I’ve never much liked Bill Gates, the multi-billionaire wonder boy who has become the richest man in the world. I’ve never much liked him because a few years ago he announced that he rarely goes to church anymore, because worship is such an inefficient use of his time. But lately I’ve been fascinated by the newfound passion of this very cool man—his passion to improve the health of the world’s children. And he’s put his money where his mouth is—giving away billions and billions of dollars, far beyond what prudent tax incentives might suggest. Yes, he has poured a significant amount of his fortune into AIDS prevention, immunization research, and eradication of preventable childhood diseases. I still don’t know if Bill Gates worships, but somehow his eager, assertive vision seems new—as if he has been given a new way of seeing his money and his wealth—as if he has decided to follow a Lord of Love instead of a lord of self. Maybe this son of honor has decided to follow the Jesus he first met in a congregational Sunday school—a Jesus who has somehow healed him and invigorated him in fresh ways and called him to new life.

The Jesus in today’s story is absolutely fascinating to me. When I was a child, it was the Jesus who shooed adults away so he could play with the children—this was the Jesus who captured my heart. Then when I was a young adult, the Jesus who healed the woman bent over for eighteen years, this was the Jesus who spoke to my need—my need to throw off the burdens of a male-dominated church and stand up straight in order to serve God as a pastor. When I became a mother, the Jesus who gave Mary to John and John to Mary—this was the Jesus who filled my heart with the relational love of compassion and caring. But at this middle-aged stage of my life, there is another Jesus who most energizes my faith. It is the Jesus in today’s text. And instead of giving me what I want or need, this Jesus usually makes me do most of the work. Jesus asks me, as he asks Bartimaeus, **WHAT DO YOU WANT ME TO DO FOR YOU?** And in the simple brilliance of that question, I—**we**—are forced to decide what is really important in our lives. Bartimaeus’ answer is the answer of mature faith. “I want to see,” he says. “I want to see the way things really are, so that I can follow you, Jesus—all the way to the cross.”

Before we wax too eloquently about the wonderful miracle of today’s healing story, let us be clear about what the text is saying. To see with the healing power of Jesus’ touch is to see a real world—a world of pain, a world of sin, a world of evil. It is to see not only the 260 American soldiers who died in Iraq, but also the estimated thousands of Iraqi soldiers and civilians killed by American bombs. It is to see not only the 5000 innocent victims slaughtered by the terrorism of fundamentalism on 9/11 in Virginia and Pennsylvania and New York City. It is to also see the 35,600 of the world’s children who were slaughtered by the terrorism of hunger on that very same September 11th. It is to see not only the joy of Christians singing and serving with love, but to also see the hatred and prejudice of Christians who use the Bible to judge and exclude and

condemn. Yes, to see with the new eyes of Bartimaeus is to see all the beauty and all the wonder and all the grace of God's brilliant and breathtaking creation. AND it is to see the cruelty and the greed and the prejudice and the hatred that God's recalcitrant children have produced—supposedly in God's holy name.

Barbara Kingsolver remembers the day her kindergarten daughter saw for the first time the way the world really is. She writes:

The closest my heart has come to breaking lately was on the day my little girl arrived home from school and ran to me, her face tense with expectation, asking, "Are they still having that war in Afghanistan?"

As if the world were such a place that in one afternoon, while kindergartners were working hard to master the letter L, it would decide to lay down its arms, I tried to keep the tears out of my eyes. I told her I was sorry; yes, they were still having the war.

*She said, "If people are just going to keep doing that, I wish I'd never been born" (from *Small Wonder*, pp.18-19).*

My friends, to see with the eyes of faith means to be what William James called "twice born" people. It is to die to the naiveté and the simplicity of a child's faith and to eagerly and assertively be born again—to jump up and to see with the heart; and then to accept all the pain and all the suffering and all the beauty and all the hope that the human heart can hold. And once we have seen with the heart, then we need to go where our heart leads us—to the very heart of the Christian faith, which is the gracious bleeding heart of Jesus, who stretched out his arms so that all the world might be one.

Today is Reformation Sunday, which for those of us who embrace the Reformed tradition, is supposed to be a solemn day of remembrance, celebration, and recommitment. Like the early reformers of the 16th century, we are to look carefully at this institution we call the church, and then judge just how closely we are embodying the compassionate and graceful heart of Jesus. And because we believe that God is sovereign, that the Risen Christ is living, and that the power of the Holy Spirit continues to make all things new, we are called—always—to be reformed and always reforming. Yes, we affirm that we are being healed again and again to see things in new ways, in fresh ways, that we are constantly being called to jump up, to throw off the comfortable cloaks of the blind past, and to follow Jesus enthusiastically and gratefully into the unknown dangers and the unimaginable opportunities of that which is yet to come.

Will Campbell, a wise, earthy Baptist preacher, tells a story about his own awakening vision as a follower of Jesus. When he was a teenager growing up in rural Mississippi, he witnessed a classic redneck lynching. A black man was caught stealing at the mayor's house. The upstanding white citizens in the community reacted with gleeful rage. They tied the man to the back of a car and dragged his body along the gravel road through the center of town, shouting hate-filled epithets and throwing rocks at the despised culprit. Finally, they dumped his body by the white cemetery, leaving his shredded flesh to fester in the blistering sun. Campbell remembers going with the other teenagers in town to ogle the broken body and to spit insults at the victim.

It was only years later, when Campbell caught the vision of God's kingdom, that he understood for the first time the justice and compassion and dignity that God intends for all—it was only then that Campbell looked back on that vicious day in Mississippi. With new eyes of faith he saw the brutality and horror of what he and others had done to another child of God. Yes, my friends, when we ask for new sight, we must be prepared for changed vision—for letting go of the prejudices, the fears, and the myths that have narrowed our living for too long.

Wendell Berry has said that “to treat life as less than a miracle is to give up on it.” Today, eagerly, painfully, obediently, Bartimaeus refuses to give up on the miracle called life, the miracle called faith, the miracle called Jesus. He jumps up and grabs the guts and the grace of the Christian life. And he calls us to do the same.

May it be so—for you and for me. Amen.