

2 Corinthians 9:6-12 ~ Mark 10:46-52 (TMB)

Getting on Board with Bartimaeus

October 28, 2018

Reformation Sunday ~ Sacrament of Infant Baptism

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Take heart, Get Up, He is calling you Mark 10:49b NRSV

Introduction to Gospel Text:

“What do you want me to do for you?” This is the question Jesus asks Bartimaeus in today’s story. But it’s not the first time he has asked it. Remember the rich young man? He wanted eternal life. And the Zebedee boys, James and John? They wanted glory. In today’s story, when Jesus asks Bartimaeus this question: “What do you want me to do for you,” the blind man’s answer is quite different. This story is the last miracle, the last healing that Rabbi Jesus does before he enters Jerusalem for the last time, headed toward his death on the cross. Today’s story concludes Mark’s crash course in discipleship that we have been working our way through for the past six Sundays, beginning at Mark 8:37.

Today, we have a small story with a large message: well suited to the occasion of today, Reformation Sunday, as we celebrate and remember 501 years ago on October 31, 1517, when Martin Luther posted his 95 Theses on the door of the Wittenberg chapel in Germany. His eyes had been opened to the ways his church needed to change to be true to Christ’s call. And the world has never been the same.

What about now? *Can* people really change? *Can* the church, really be changed for the better? Hold that big question in your heart, as we focus in on this small story, something that likely occurred in the space of hardly more than five minutes, one day on the edge of Jericho.

Sermon

You may have seen this slogan on a refrigerator magnet or a T-shirt: “Jesus loves you...but I’m his favorite.” The Right Reverend Gene Robinson, former Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of New Hampshire, has this magnet on his refrigerator. “I don’t know how it works, but the miracle is, this is true for everyone.”¹ We are all God’s favorite child. Gene Robinson spoke about it in the sermon he preached Friday morning at the National Cathedral memorial service to inter Matthew Shepard’s ashes there, twenty years after the hate crime that ended Matt’s young life. Yes, Matthew Shepard was God’s favorite.

Moments ago, we just had the wonderful joy of baptizing God’s favorite child, Judith Watters Jackan, born just four months and one day ago. We claimed in her baptism that she is God’s own, beloved child, forever and ever. We also promised to raise and nurture her in the faith we share, our faith in Christ Jesus to save us, heal us, yes, to change us for the better.

We have four other of God's favorite children: Henry, Charlotte, Ryan and Davis, in our confirmation class this year, learning together all year about the Christian faith and our Presbyterian understanding of what it means to follow Christ. Last Sunday in Confirmation Class, we just happened to be teaching the chapter titled "Reformed and Always Reforming." Carmen Lawler, lead teacher of the confirmation class, wisely started this session with the question, "What does the word "to reform" mean? After a bit of hesitation, one of our bright confirmands replied: "to change."

Yes, at the heart of the reformed faith is that word, that verb, "to change." OK, I can't resist. How many Presbyterians does it take to change a light bulb?... *Change?* The crazy thing is how on the one hand, we resist, if not refuse, from the very core of our beings to change, and yet at the same time we crave the idea of finding a better way to live and move and have our being. You might not have thought of this yet today, but didn't we decide to come to church today, rather than to sleep in, because we were hoping that God would somehow change us to be better people and show us how to be a better world?

I'm here to tell you that today's gospel story gives me hope. Hope for baby Judy and hope for our four confirmands as I try to imagine what our church and our world will look like in 2068, when Judy is 50 years old and our teen confirmands are in their 60's. After the week we've had, with the political rancor around the caravan of Central American migrant refugee families who keep pushing their way north; the search for truth around the death of the Washington Post journalist Jamal Khashoggi; the threatening packages delivered to prominent political leaders, and then just yesterday's horrific terrorist attack on Jews during Shabbat services in their synagogue in Pittsburgh, killing 11. Truly: I think we could all benefit from a fresh jolt of hope. And this story does not disappoint.

In these six verses the crowd changes from shushing Bartimaeus to being his advocate and cheerleader. And Bartimaeus changes from being blind to seeing again. And not only that, the now sighted Bartimaeus reverses course and follows the call to become a follower of Jesus. There's enough gospel truth in this story for all of us, if we take a moment to open our eyes and hearts and really look.

I love the way Mark is drenched with irony: the ones who think they've got it right, have it wrong: the rich young ruler, the Zededeo boys. And the ones who think they've got it wrong, have it right: The woman with the issue of blood, and the father of the epileptic son, who cried, "I believe, help my unbelief." In today's story, Bartimaeus, cries for mercy, and will not be silenced or dismissed by the crowd's attempt to shush him. His story mirrors (as Mark loves to do) the woman with the issue of blood who pushes her way through the crowd, just to touch the hem of Jesus' robe.

Here's what I see this story, and those others are teaching us about change. And on a larger scale, what we can learn about reformation. Change in one heart, or in the heart of a church body, ***begins with a cry for mercy***. Mercy, because we know that *without* Jesus, we cannot see. Without the Light of Christ, our narrow perspective blinds us. Christ is the one who can open our eyes, but first we must admit our blindness. Once we make this move, the Light of the World can reframe and reform our vision.

Next, comes the call to let go of, or throw off what we no longer need. This may be the thing that now is holding us back from moving forward on the path to positive change. In our story, Bartimaeus throws off his cloak and springs up from his former position seated on the side of the road. To change, calls us to throw off the blinders that we no longer need or can no longer allow, to distort our vision. For a person or a church, this move can take a long time. Mercifully, Christ stays with us, for as long as it takes.

In my lifetime, I can attest to major changes for the good that Presbyterians, reformed and always reforming, have accomplished. I have seen us change, slowly ever so slowly, let go of the cloaks that cut off the opportunity to serve in the church as ordained officers; and cut off the opportunity to marry for some, because of heir gender or gender identity. We have changes and widened our vision about who we ordain and about who we marry. Slowly we are changing; we are widening our understanding about who are God's favorites. And God knows, we still have a long way to go.

Especially this week, we are being called to open our hearts and ask, "Who still needs to know they are also God's favorites?" And what can we do to share this Good News? My eyes were opened one day in a conversation with Bushra and Phyllis, Muslim and Jewish friends I had grown to know through a Women's Interfaith Lunch group in Dayton, Ohio. They were discussing the plans they each had in place at their mosque and synagogue as to what they would do if a hate crime were perpetrated at their house of worship. I had been listening quietly to their discussion, and then they both looked at me and asked, "What is your church's plan in the event that your church is victimized by a hate crime?" As a pastor of a predominantly white, Presbyterian church, honestly I had to say, we had never even thought about this question. It had not occurred to us that we could ever be the victims of this kind of prejudice and hate. In that moment, my eyes were opened to my blindness.

What protective cloaks would we no longer need to cling to, if we trusted more fully Jesus' way of compassion and mercy for all the world? What new vision will Jesus grant to us if only we are able to spring up in faith and let Jesus open our eyes?

The story goes that the essayist Henry David Thoreau was imprisoned for protesting the institution of slavery. When fellow writer Ralph Waldo Emerson paid a visit to him, Emerson looked in at the cell and said to him, “What in the world are you doing in there?” to which Thoreau replied, “No, sir, the question is, what in the world are *you* doing out *there*?”ⁱⁱ So, Protestants: what *should* we be protesting that distorts, demeans, defames, and diminishes the beauty of this world that God came to save? How is God calling us to continue to reform and reshape our church and world so that in 2068, fifty years from now, Judy, Henry, Charlotte, Ryan and Davis, will have themselves in a world better than the one we have today?

To each and to all of God’s favorite children I say, “Take heart, get up, Jesus is calling you, and you, and me, and all of us.” Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PynGj7MPMU8>

ⁱⁱ Erik Kolbell, *What Jesus Meant*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press), 133