

Friendship United Church
Mark 10: 46-52
October 25, 2009
Rev. Robin Sherman

I've always thought that I could never cope with being blind. I could handle being deaf, perhaps because I already have a hearing disability I don't feel as threatened by that but to be blind I find terrifying. It wouldn't be just missing seeing the beautiful colours of fall or the new greening of spring. It would be the inability to visually process what is happening around me. I think it would be disorienting and confusing; frightening to not know if someone is in the room with you. Some of you may know someone who is blind and indeed the Friendship congregation has a person who attends who is blind, and I think she just might tell me I have it wrong; that people with visual impairment may not be able to see but have a remarkable way of sensing a deeper presence than the rest of us.

And so it is that the story of Bartimaeus is told to us in Mark not for us to feel sorry for the blind beggar but to give us a deeper insight into the mind and mystery of God.

First I want you to imagine how difficult it would be to be blind in Jesus' day. No social services sending in workers to help; no place to live because no one would allow a defective person to live with them; you would be the brunt of jokes and to be feared by the rest of the community. There certainly was no working dog to guide Bartimaeus around the rough streets and roadways. The safest thing for Bartimaeus would be to find a spot to sit and to stay there and beg for a living; hoping someone would throw you a piece of bread or some money.

No, people in Jesus time often thought that they would be better off without the blind, as well without lepers, or orphans, or widows, or anyone else who was an economic drain. The blind were like a "black hole": taking without ever having anything to give back. The economy in ancient times relied on give and take and so people with differing conditions had **no value** in this world.

And then along comes Jesus. We have an advantage when we hear this story, we know that this story, like other stories of how Jesus regularly encountered the sick or the homeless or the widow or anyone else in his society who had no one to care for them, is a story of amazing social significance. When everyone else around scorns and shuns the blind, or the sick, Jesus, in God's name, not only cared for them but gave them wholeness; being healed by Jesus restored a person's **value** within their community.

Over the noise of the crowd, Jesus hears blind Bartimaeus crying out to him, even over the noise of those who are trying to shut Bartimaeus up. They are embarrassed by the beggar and afraid that Jesus will be upset by the actions of the beggar and curse them or leave town because of him.

But Jesus stops! Jesus stops and says to the crowd that is trying to silence Bartimaeus: "Call him". Mark writes that, as quick as the crowd was to try and silence Bartimaeus, they are now as quick to encourage him to go to Jesus. So, Bartimaeus jumps up and goes to Jesus. He doesn't hang back in embarrassment or worry about what the others will think, he jumps up throwing off his beggars cloak. Jesus asks him, "What do you want me to do for you?" Very simply Bartimaeus replies "Good teacher, I want to see." Notice he doesn't say "make me see" or "heal my sight". He says simply, I want to see.

We can't know for certain what Bartimaeus hoped would happen. Perhaps Bartimaeus expected Jesus to heal him, although he would have little information to base this assumption on. Perhaps he wanted Jesus, to set things right between Bartimaeus and God, so that he would be in right relationship with God. Remember Jews in antiquity thought that sickness or defects of any kind were caused primarily by sin or by some other disruption of their relationship with God. He may have hoped that at best his relationship with God would be restored.

But, whatever his expectation of the outcome, it is unlikely that anyone present would have expected Jesus to say, "Go, your faith has saved you" without any further treatment.

Unlike the healing in Mark 8 of the blind man where Jesus uses spit and dirt on the mans eyes, in this case there has been no physical contact between Bartimaeus and Jesus.

Jesus doesn't say anything that might indicate he has done something to make him see. No "abracadabra" or "there now you can see".

Instead Jesus simply sends him on his way an able bodied man who can now reclaim a place in society, no longer on the outside of the community.

The truth is, and Jesus points out, that it is Bartimaeus' own doing that he is well. His own faith has saved him, his own confidence.

But he doesn't stop there, Bartimaeus doesn't go back into his community; he follows Jesus along the road presumably to Jerusalem, perhaps right to the cross.

The story of Bartimaeus is one that shows the contrast between the ones who think they see and the ones who truly see what is needed and who can help. Even Jesus' closest companions, disciples like James and John who just before this story have asked Jesus to make them his princes when he takes over the power. They could not see as Bartimaeus could see. They were caught up in the power struggle and seemed to have little faith in the true message of Jesus, the compassionate Messiah.

Where are you today? Do you have the insight of a blind person, willing to call out over the crowd for help and the confidence and faith to heal yourself and others? When was the last time you threw off your cloak and jumped up to ask Jesus for mercy? Do you have the confidence and faith in Jesus to follow him to Jerusalem?