

Sermon Title: Naming Your Healing
Text: Mark 10:46-52; Job 42:1-6, 10-17

October 29, 2006
Memorial Presbyterian Church, Appleton, WI
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Just last Sunday I began my sermon noting that there are times when the strangeness of the text provides the key that just might unlock the meaning God intends for our hearing. So I don't suppose I should be surprised that the whimsy of the Spirit would set on the plate before us *this* week about as familiar a biblical story as you could find. Bartimaeus, the blind man who "stood by the road, and he cried!" Though Jesus' healing of blindness is sort of sprinkled throughout the Gospel stories, and takes some odd turns in other accounts, if you had to name *one* person healed by Jesus, I suspect Bartimaeus would eventually come to mind, if not by name, then at least by the details of his story.

He's the one who was sitting at the side of the road when Jesus walked by with his disciples, and a crowd. He was crying out and making a scene, and the crowd tried desperately to shush him, but he only shouted louder. Finally Jesus stops before him, with words that ring with significance, especially on *Reformation Sunday*, as we recount the first movements of Martin Luther's challenge of the corruptions that had eaten into the foundations of the medieval church, Bartimaeus is healed, not with mud and spittle, or with a touch, but with a word: "Go your way, *your faith* has made you well!" It's one of the key understandings of our Reformed tradition, formulated more precisely by Paul in his letter to the Ephesians, "By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing—it is a gift from God!" Immediately, Bartimaeus' eyes are opened, and he joins Jesus along the way. It's all exactly the way we remember it! A good, familiar story.

But in precisely the same way in which the strangeness of the text nudged us last week, I found myself pushed along by its familiarity *this* week. I found myself stopping at things I hadn't quite noticed before, wondering about the specifics of the conversation, the tone, the words that are used. And I found myself at precisely the same point as I was a week earlier: familiarity *may* breed contempt, but if you let it dwell on you a bit, it can breed affection, and maybe even truth!

I was intrigued by the setting of the story, along the road to Jericho where the walls of the city had tumbled down without as much as an arrow shot. You remember, Joshua had the troops, who were severely outnumbered, marching around the city making all the noise they could until that moment when God ordered them to raise up a great shout, and "the walls came a tumblin' down!" How poetic that it would be as Jesus left this city that Bartimaeus would raise up such a shout that in spite of the crowd's desperate attempts to maintain some sort of decorum, he managed to get Jesus' attention.

And certainly it can't just be coincidence that the very next scene in Mark's Gospel has the crowds spreading their cloaks before Jesus as he entered into Jerusalem, shouting at the tops of their lungs, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of Father David! Hosanna in the Highest!"

It's a little bit disturbing to someone who's been raised and nurtured in a quiet sort of Presbyterianism to have all this shouting going on—not just Bartimaeus' ranting, but the echoes

of Jericho, and the intimations of Palm Sunday. The din is a little dizzying for someone whose tastes turn toward Enya and elevator music. *Especially* right now in my life, when I'm about ready to throw a brick through my television if it would only stop the ranting of this political season gone amok, with shrill attack ads now not only taking up permanent residence on my TV, but threatening me every time the phone rings. I personally wish there was a little less shouting, and a little more quiet discernment.

But the Gospel's the Gospel, and one of the things this familiar story reminds me of is that whatever it is that Jesus has to bring into this world, it will more than likely shake things up, push us beyond comfort, and make us aware of the fact that it's not just happy us along the road, but the blind beggars and the world's forgotten and forlorn, as well. And it is not to my tightly reasoned arguments or witty repartee, but to *their* shouts that the savior will attend.

The question the text raises, I guess, is whether we're Bartimaeus, striving to get the Savior's attention, or the crowd who is seeking to silence him. It matters, I think, as we try hard to be the church God is calling us to be. Because it reminds me, at least, that what stops Jesus in his tracks is sometimes the very thing I'd rather brush off, or leave in the dust. Especially in a political climate that sees strangers and foreigners, people with disabilities, and those who have trouble coping for themselves as a threat, we need to be mindful that of all the crowd that surrounded Jesus, it was the blind beggar who commanded his attention. If we seek only to build a community of folk who look, and act, and think just like us, where will we fit into this story? The world into which Jesus sought to step was one in which the deepest pains were laid bare—in which there was no pretense, but only the deep recognition of human need: “Jesus, son of David, have *mercy* on me!” It is among those who know their own deep need that the presence of the Christ will most certainly dwell...not among those who have all the right answers down pat!

That said, however, the thing that I think most startled me in this story, as I sort of trusted myself into its familiarity, is the exchange between Jesus and Bartimaeus himself. It's in the last two verses we read from the Gospel this morning. Bartimaeus threw off his cloak (listen for the echoes of what is about to come, as the crowd threw off their cloaks before Jesus in that Palm Sunday procession) and he sprang up, coming toward Jesus. But I was caught off guard by Jesus' first words, once they'd finally met. “What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus asks. Frankly, I can't imagine that there was anything more obvious than what Bartimaeus wanted of Jesus. “I'm a beggar...I'm blind...this whole crowd knows what you've done for others! Come on, Jesus! Don't make me *beg* again!” “Teacher” he says. “Rabbouni”. And there's another strong echo in the text, because that word is heard only one other time in the entire bible, when Mary meets the risen Christ outside the tomb in John's Gospel. “Teacher,” he says, “Let me see again!”

As I let that familiar conversation sift down into my soul, I found myself wondering how often in my own life of prayer I'm more than willing to name what everyone else in this world needs from God, but how hard it is to name your own brokenness. It's not so much that Jesus makes him grovel as it seems necessary for Bartimaeus to name his need before it can be met. Again, it's a most appropriate thought on Reformation Sunday, because it is one of the fundamental tones in the chord of Reformed thought: the first gift God gives us—the one that precedes the grace of God's healing, is the ability to name our *own* brokenness.

Once you've got Jesus' attention, what is it that you really need? Not what needs to change in that world out there, but what is *your* need? In the depths of your soul? What blindness, what poverty, what brokenness is it that only God's grace can heal? Because the first movement of God's graceful, healing love is that which allows us to name for ourselves our need.

But I suppose this is where the text most brought me up short. Because what Bartimaeus *asks* is not what Jesus *does*. He does not reach out and touch his eyes. He doesn't, as he did alongside the pool at Bethsaida, mix up some spit and mud and put it on his eyes. To one who was still blind, Jesus' word is, "Get up and go." And then I'm afraid translation obscures. I understand the decisions that lead to "your faith has made you well," but it's word that appears over a hundred times in the New Testament, and in the vast majority, it would be translated, "your faith has *saved* you."

What's the difference? As important as it might be for us to name the healing we need, this familiar story made fresh reminds me that what I need most and first is not the healing I can name but to be *saved*—rescued, put back into place, made safe. Again, it's something so appropriate for Reformation Sunday. Because one of the core assumptions of a Reformed faith is that what we really need, before anything else we could think to name, is for God to reclaim us, and enfold us—to *save* us, not from the brokenness we can name, but from *ourselves*. And as was true for Bartimaeus, so it is true for us: what *saves* is not the right thought, or the right diagnosis, or the right feeling. What saves us is our faith: the ability to trust that which we *cannot* see, but which nevertheless grasps us, and transforms us such that *immediately* our sight is restored, and we are able to follow along the way.

It is by *faith* that we are saved. And Job, who's sort of been lurking in our worship these past weeks emerges from the shadows, defining what precisely that means. Believing is not blithely accepting that which we patently know to be false, nor is it manufacturing happy feelings no matter how dismal the reality that surrounds us. Faith is not the suspension of a painful reality in favor of a pleasant fantasy. Faith is to stand fearlessly before the God of all Creation, not with complaint, or indignity, but as the creature before the creator: "I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. 'Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?' Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things to wonderful for me, which I did not know. 'Hear, and I will speak; I will question you, and you declare to me!'"

That is faith: to stand before God as we truly are, and yet *not* be consumed. It is to seek, not to shape the world according to my will, but to allow my will to be shaped according to the Master's hand, in order to work God's saving intention in this world.

It's good, on this Reformation Sunday, to remind ourselves of just what it was that got Martin Luther so exercised that he charged up the steps of that cathedral at Wittenberg and challenged the whole world to a fight: a church that had reduced God's saving work to a petty calculus of indulgences; that had sold off the responsibility of each soul to stand before God with fear and trembling, to name its own need for God's healing touch so that it could learn, by grace alone, that the healing for which it longs begins, not in our naming it, but in the God who knew before we did what we needed, who stopped to hear our cries, and who then sends us, that we might follow along the way.

No denomination, no tradition, no church has a corner on the market of that faith. It's a gift that has already been given—bought and paid for by that One who, leaving Bartimaeus behind, rode into Jerusalem, and on to a cross, that all the world might be reconciled to God. It's a gift that has already been given to *you*. What remains to be seen is exactly what we will *do* with it. “Go your way,” Jesus said. “Your faith has already saved you!”

Let us pray.