

Sermon: From Blindness to Faith

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles PC, October 24, 2021)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

A 'blind spot', physiologically, is an obscuration of the visual field. It is located in a small area on the retina, where the optic nerve passes through the optic disc. It is insensitive to light due to the lack of photoreceptor cells, so the corresponding part of the field of vision is invisible. It is actually quite interesting as somehow the brain processes the lack of sight by taking information from the other eye, so a blind spot is not normally perceived.

A 'blind spot', vehicularly, is an area to the side and slightly behind a driver's field of vision. It is normally not reflected in the vehicle's sideview mirrors. One of the first lessons that any aspiring driver would need to learn, is to check your blind spot by turning one's head slightly to the left or to the right, when attempting to change lane. Failing to do so will certainly guarantee a failure during a driving test, and may even result in a totally avoidable collision with other unseen vehicles.

A 'blind spot', metaphorically, is an area in life where one fails to exercise sound judgement or discretion. An area of lack, where one does not even accept or acknowledge its existence. It is due not to the lack of sight, but the lack of insight. It is realized only on the hindsight, often too late for any chance of course correction.

I once came across a story of a pastor, a doctor and an engineer who went golfing. While waiting one morning for a particularly slow group of golfers up ahead, the engineer fumed, "What's with those guys? We must have been waiting for 15 minutes!" The doctor chimed in, "I don't know, but I've never seen such ineptitude!" The pastor noted, "Hey, here comes the greenskeeper. Let's have a word with him."

"Hi George. Say, what's with the group ahead of us? They are rather slow, aren't they?" The greenskeeper replied, "Oh, yah, that's a group of blind firefighters. They lost their sight saving our clubhouse from a fire last year. So we always let them play for free, anytime."

The three went silent for a moment, and the pastor quickly said, "That's so sad. I think I will say a special prayer for them later tonight." The doctor chimed in, "Good idea. And later tonight, I will contact my

ophthalmologist buddy and see if there's anything he could do for them." After a rather uncomfortable pause, the engineer finally quipped, "That's all good, but why can't these guys play...later tonight?"

Blind spot? Or that guy was simply being a jerk. One thing we could say about blindness, is that there are often multiple layers of it—in sight, hearts, life, and in faith. The Gospel reading today takes us to the story of Bartimaeus, in what appears to be simple healing story, should open our eyes in multiple ways. Here is a question we should ask ourselves: Is this a healing story or a calling story?

Bartimaeus, the son of Timaeus, was a blind beggar sitting by the road side in the city of Jericho. The fact that we know his name, or should I say that the author of Mark felt it necessary to include his name, should be noted. Take for example, we don't know the name of the paralyzed man in chapter 2, nor the man with shrivelled hand in chapter 3. We don't know the name of the woman who was bleeding for twelve years in chapter 5, nor the deaf and mute man in chapter 7. They were all healed by Jesus, yet they remain nameless. However, we know the name of this blind beggar: Bartimaeus. We even know the name of his father: Timaeus.

Bible commentators have noted the unusual construct of this name. 'Bar' in Aramaic means 'son of', yet Timaeus is a common Greek name. Some have speculated this name, and the fact that the author of Mark felt it necessary to explain what it means, means something. Without going into more details, let us simply note that we know his name and his lineage.

So Bartimaeus, the son of Timaeus was sitting by the roadside of Jericho, begging. He heard that Jesus was passing by, so he cried out "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!". Evidently, though blind, he knew Jesus. Bartimaeus knows Jesus enough to address him as the 'Son of David'. It is a title to the Messianic hope in late Judaism, of the coming saviour sent by God, in the lineage of King David, who was to restore the nation of Israel to its former glory. This saviour was to be a respected teacher, a great prophet, who shall do signs and wonders in accordance to Prophet Isaiah, "*to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, and the recovery of sight to the blind.*" (Isaiah 64:1, Luke 4:18)

So Bartimaeus, seizing the opportunity, not willing to simply let Jesus pass him by, shouted out at the top of his lungs, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" But the passerby, probably including the disciples of Jesus, ordered him to be quiet. Not willing to be so easily deterred, Bartimaeus cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!".

By now, Jesus had heard his cry, so in verse 49, *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."*

Do you hear it? In one short verse, we hear the verb 'to call' (or Greek φωνέω: phónéō) used three times. It is the same verb used by Jesus in opening chapter of Mark, when he stood on the shore of Galilee, and called out to the first batch of disciples, to follow him. Here, Jesus called to the disciples to call the blind beggar, in an indirect way, sort of asking his disciples to 'make another disciple'.

So facing this call, Bartimaeus threw off his cloak, he sprung up and came to Jesus. Then Jesus asked him a most curious question, *"What do you want me to do for you?"* As if he was not sure what the primary need of that blind beggar would be. But then again, when one does come to Jesus, when you do encounter the risen Christ, what would your need be? What would be your primary concern? How would you reply to Jesus?

Bartimaeus replied, *"My teacher, let me see again."* Evidently, he was not born blind. He had somehow lost his sight, and he longed to have it back. So Jesus said to him, *"Go; your faith has made you well."*

It was a simple faith: **an acknowledgment of who Jesus is, a willingness to respond to his call, and a trust to bring one's need to Jesus, begging and counting on his mercy.** The Gospel account informs us that immediately Bartimaeus regained his sight and followed Jesus on the way, that is on the way to Jerusalem, to the cross.

Commentators have generally pointed out that Bartimaeus was the last person healed by Jesus. I would say he was the last person called by Jesus and followed. As a healing story, Jesus comes across as merciful, powerful, and faithful. As a calling story, we come to understand that the opposite of blindness is not sight—rather, it is faith.

In faith, Bartimaeus acknowledged Jesus. In faith, he shouted out, cried out, sprung up. As John Shea (a Catholic theologian) rightly points out that "our blind and begging condition makes us ready, but it is the call of Jesus that raises us off the ground".

As it turns out, Bartimaeus though blind, sees Jesus well enough. Being healed of his blindness may have opened his sight, but his insight to Jesus is impeccable all along. So in faith, Bartimaeus got up and followed Jesus on the way to Jerusalem.

Early in the church history, before finally settled on being called the Christians, the followers of Jesus were called: 'those belonging to the

way' (as in Acts 9:2), or 'followers of the way' (as in Acts 24:14). 'The Way', that is the way of suffering, the way of the cross, the way of death and resurrection, and through it, the way to glory.

The story of Bartimaeus, is our story. We all have experienced hardships, of mountains too high to climb, of foes too great to overcome. The psalmist in Psalm 34 describes that experience most vividly. Allow me to read verse 1-8, in the Message version of the Bible,

*"I bless God every chance I get;
my lungs expand with his praise.
I live and breathe God;
if things aren't going well,
hear this and be happy:*

*Join me in spreading the news;
together let's get the word out.
God met me more than halfway,
he freed me from my anxious fears.
Look at him; give him your warmest smile.
Never hide your feelings from him.*

*When I was desperate, I called out,
and God got me out of a tight spot.
God's angel sets up a circle
of protection around us while we pray.
Open your mouth and taste,
open your eyes and see—how good God is.
Blessed are you who run to him.*

The story of Bartimaeus is indeed our story. Jesus is calling out to each one of us, "What do you want me to do for you?" How then would you respond?

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.