

## THE COURAGE TO SEE

Job 42:1-6, 10-17; Psalm 34:1-8; Hebrews 7:23-28; Mark 10:46-52

A sermon preached by the Reverend Theodore S. Atkinson  
Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA  
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IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

The story of how Jesus healed blind Bartimaeus raises questions. First, who was Bartimaeus? Why is his name mentioned considering how we know the names of so very few people Jesus healed? And, secondly, how did he come to have faith in Jesus? I believe it's good to ask questions when we read the Bible. Asking questions is one mark of being human – of being created in the image of God. I encourage you to do the same not only when you read the Bible, but also when you read the newspapers, or watch television, and before you vote. Ask questions! We don't usually get answers without asking.

So let me share with you some tentative answers to two questions the story of Blind Bartimaeus raises. First, how did Bartimaeus come to have faith in Jesus? We know he had faith because Jesus said, "Go, your faith has healed you." Where did he get his faith? Apparently, Bartimaeus had never met Jesus. Hadn't traveled with Jesus. Hadn't seen Jesus multiply the loaves and fish. Hadn't seen Jesus transfigured on the Mount of Transfiguration. Hadn't seen Jesus walk on water. Even if Bartimaeus had been traveling with Jesus, he still wouldn't have seen because he was blind. The only way Bartimaeus would have known about Jesus was because somebody told him. Having heard about him, he believed. I think the writer of the Gospel of John must have had Blind Bartimaeus in mind when he wrote, "Blessed are those who believe and yet have not seen."

Secondly, why does Mark tell us Bartimaeus' name? Bartimaeus is named, most likely, because he became well known to Christians who first read the Gospel of Mark. He was an example of those who believe before having seen. Bartimaeus continued to follow Jesus. His faith carried him through the darkness of the crucifixion when all the disciples felt abandoned by God. His faith continued until the darkness of Good Friday lifted and he saw the sun rise on Easter morning. I imagine the story of Bartimaeus had a special appeal to non-Christians living throughout the Roman Empire because, like Bartimaeus, they'd never seen Jesus. All they knew about Jesus was what they'd heard. The story of Bartimaeus invited them to believe with the hope of eventually seeing Christ.

That's why I find Blind Bartimaeus so fascinating because I've never seen Jesus either. My mom and dad told me about Jesus – told about how Jesus welcomed little children, and how Jesus welcomed me when I was baptized. They told me about how Jesus multiplied the loaves and bread, and how Jesus put bread on their table during the dark days of the Great Depression when my dad was out of work. They told how Jesus stilled the storm on the sea of Galilee, and how he stilled the storm of fear in their hearts when my brother went off to the Korea War. They told me how Jesus healed the sick, and how Jesus healed me when I got sick. I also heard stories about Jesus from Sunday School teachers and ministers. I'd never seen Jesus, but, like Bartimaeus, I believed in him as a child.

But as I grew older the eyes of my faith became clouded by cataracts of skepticism. I started asking questions. Sometimes, apparently silly questions like how come Jesus didn't heal my pet cat who got hit by a car? And sometimes more serious questions. Why doesn't Jesus heal my niece, Connie, born mentally retarded? And doctrinal questions. Is Christ the only way to salvation? And what about creation and evolution? And how can I know Jesus really rose from the dead? I wanted to see. But I couldn't see – so when everybody else went through the confirmation process in my church I opted out. I couldn't see how I could join when I had so many questions.

The story of Blind Bartimaeus means so much to me because it eventually helped me to see that faith precedes sight and often leads to sight. Faith precedes certainty. Faith precedes proof. The most important things in life can't be seen, without first believing. Faith precedes understanding and often leads to understanding. Faith is following when you can't understand, you can't see where you're going to end up until you get there. Then you see. Can you imagine where'd we'd be if we just sat on our duffs until we could clearly see the result of all our choices. Who'd get married? Who'd have children? Who'd take any risk? Without faith – without acting in faith before we've seen what's going to happen there'd be no progress. No scientific progress without scientists acting on hunches before they know for sure about the truth of a hypothesis. Some things we simply can't know, can't see, without taking risks, without taking action, without getting involved. That's what I learn from Blind Bartimaeus who came to Jesus before he could see him.

Alfred Lord Tennyson lived in 19<sup>th</sup> century Victorian England - a time when clouds of doubt blinded so many people from seeing God. Many of England's leading intellectuals had begun to question the truth of the Christian faith. Literary criticism raised questions about the authorship of the book of Genesis. Historical criticism questioned whether Jesus ever lived. Sigmund Freud asserted that belief in God was simply wish fulfillment and that God is an illusion. Charles Darwin raised questions about meaning and purpose in the universe with his assertion that evolution is a result of matter, time, and chance. Clouds of skepticism blinded people. In that context, Alfred Lord Tennyson, penned a prayer expressing his faith Christ whom he could not see or prove.

Strong Son of God, immortal Love,  
Whom we, that have not seen thy face,  
By faith, and faith alone, embrace,  
Believing where we cannot prove...

We have but faith: we cannot know;  
For knowledge is of things we see;  
And yet we trust it comes from thee,  
A beam in darkness: let it grow.

Listen friends, many people in our culture, like the people of Jericho, sternly order us to keep our cries *of faith*; our cries *for* faith to ourselves. But through the retelling of the story of Blind Bartimaeus, Jesus Christ meets us again. He's not waiting for us to figure it all out. He's not lying back observing to see if we have enough faith. He's not withholding his approval pending our affirmation of a creed. He stands before us and through his Holy Spirit, he calls us. The Holy Spirit whispers, "Take heart; get up, he's calling you." You say you can't see. That's okay. Throw off your cloak, spring up and come groping in your darkness to Jesus. Jesus sees you when you can't see him. It's by his faith, his faithfulness, that we receive our own faith. No matter how troubling your doubts may be, no matter how inadequate you may feel, you would not be here this morning if you had not thrown off the cloak of your bed covers, sprung out of bed and come. You wouldn't be here if you didn't have at least a seed of faith in Christ. Follow Christ and you'll receive your sight - you'll begin to see.

Strengthen us, O God, in the power of your Spirit to bring good news to the poor and lift blind eyes to sight, to loose the chains that bind and claim your blessing for all people. Through Christ our Lord we pray. Amen.