

Psalm 119:12-18

Mark 10:46-52

October 24, 2021

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

ON BLIND FAITH

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

In February 1969, rock and blues fans were excited when it was announced that Eric Clapton, Ginger Baker, and Steve Winwood had formed a new group. Clapton and Baker's band Cream had recently broken up. Steve Winwood's band Traffic was on a break. In May, bassist Rick Grech from the band Family joined the new band. This new band was hailed as a supergroup, because of the talents and skills of the members. Hopes were high for great success. In fact, the band took its name from the confidence that people had in the future. Eric Clapton himself thought the band's name described "everyone's self-belief that the band would be successful, no matter what happened." The band was called Blind Faith. Six months later, after recording one album and finishing a three-month tour, Blind Faith broke up.

Their one album, called Blind Faith, had only six songs, including one written by Eric Clapton called "Presence of the Lord." He called it a song of gratitude to God and some friends who had helped him overcome his drug addiction. At the time, he also made a deeper spiritual commitment as a Christian. The lyrics are few and simple:

*I have finally found a way to live
Just like I never could before
I know that I don't have much to give
But I can open any door*

*Everybody knows the secret
Everybody knows the score
I have finally found a way to live
In the color of the Lord*

*Everybody knows the secret
Everybody knows the score
I have finally found a place to live
In the presence of the Lord*

You know, Bartimaeus the blind beggar beside the road at Jericho could have sung that song: "I have finally found a way to live, just like I never could before. I know that I don't have much to give, but I can open any door." Bartimaeus didn't have much to give – maybe nothing more than his cloak. He depended on what others chose to give him as he sat by the side of the road. But, when he heard that Jesus of Nazareth

was headed his way, he took a chance – some might say he acted out of blind faith – and cried out, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” And he finally found a place to live in the presence of the Lord.

When Jesus met Bartimaeus outside of Jericho, he had almost reached the end of his journey to Jerusalem, just another fifteen miles to go, about a day’s walk. All along the way, Jesus had been telling his disciples what awaited him in Jerusalem – “the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again.” (Mark 10:33-34)

As Jesus headed out on the way to Jerusalem, he healed another blind man at Bethsaida. Now, at the end of the journey, we hear about Jesus healing the blind beggar Bartimaeus at Jericho. In between these two “bookend” stories, the disciples don’t get what Jesus is talking about. They don’t “see” who Jesus really is and what Jesus’s mission is really all about. So, the two blind men who receive their sight – who “see” Jesus – stand in stark contrast to the disciples (and many of the other people along the way).

As someone has noted, these stories about two men who once were blind, but now can see illustrate exactly what Jesus teaches all along the way about being his follower – “to come to Jesus and so to see; to see and so to follow Jesus.”

Pun intended, the story of Bartimaeus helps us look back and see what has come before – what it means to be a true follower of Jesus – and to look ahead and see what is coming up. He calls out to Jesus, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” just as the crowds shout when Jesus enters Jerusalem on Palm Sunday in the very next chapter of Mark’s gospel. While this story about Jesus healing the blind man Bartimaeus is, without question, a miracle story, it’s also a call story. Listen again to v. 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.” Bartimaeus called out to Jesus – “Son of David, have mercy on me!” Jesus called Bartimaeus and Bartimaeus “followed him on the way” – which is exactly what Jesus has been teaching his disciples all along the way. In his article called “More than a miracle story, this is a story of a call,” Timothy Adkins-Jones writes, “Bartimaeus leads the way, for he recognizes his healing not as something to be selfishly enjoyed but as a call to discipleship. Jesus tells him to go his own way because his faith has made him well, but Bartimaeus chooses instead to follow Jesus on the road. When blessed, when healed, when delivered by God, the temptation is to take our gift and to walk away. Bartimaeus reminds us that a disciple always follows and that the way to life is always behind Jesus.”¹

We’ve been making the journey with Jesus and his disciples on the road now since the beginning of September. “The road,” however, can also be understood as “the way.” So, there’s more to the story than just a physical walk from Caesarea Philippi up north to Jericho and Jerusalem down south. Remember when Thomas said to Jesus, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.” (John 14:5-6) When Bartimaeus

regained his sight, he followed Jesus on the road/on the way from Jericho to Jerusalem. He followed Jesus, who **is** the way. Isn't it interesting – and powerful – that when Bartimaeus was blind, he was sitting **beside** the road/beside the way, but when he could see, he was following Jesus **on** the road/on the way?

If you use *These Days* for daily devotions, you will remember that Thursday's devotion was based on this story from Mark, called "Christ Our Healer." It's worth recalling: "When you pass a panhandler at an intersection, what do you feel? Bartimaeus counts on the pity of passersby as he begs alms on the road out of Jericho. Part of the surprise in this story is that Bartimaeus – the *blind* man – *sees* Jesus better than the crowd already journeying with Jesus. From outside the congregation of Jesus' followers, Bartimaeus calls Jesus by the messianic title, 'Son of David.' A few Jesus followers reluctantly show Bartimaeus the way to Jesus by their sight. But it is Bartimaeus who shows them the way to Jesus by faith. Perhaps it is the crowd that is most to be pitied.

"When we pity others whom we deem less fortunate, do we disqualify ourselves from following them on the road of radical dependence and true faith to Jesus? When we insist on keeping quiet about our spiritual poverty and inner brokenness in order to maintain decorum, do we disqualify ourselves from a transformative encounter with Jesus? Perhaps we are the ones most in need of healing."²

Bartimaeus certainly wasn't perfect. What human being is? But he stands in contrast to the disciples and other people on the road in his request of Jesus and in his following Jesus. "What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asked him – the very same question he asked the brothers James and John. They wanted glory and power and authority and recognition. Bartimaeus wanted mercy and to receive his sight. And when he could see Jesus, he followed him, just as Jesus has been teaching all along the way.

Bartimaeus also stands in contrast to the rich man who walked away sorrowful from Jesus' invitation, "Follow me." Do you remember? "When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions." (Mark 10:22) The rich man couldn't put down what he had to follow Jesus on the road/on the way. But Bartimaeus did! There are so many interesting details in today's story, but this one stands out as kind of odd. Why do you suppose Mark tells us that Bartimaeus threw off his cloak? The story would have worked just fine if it had said, "He sprang up and came to Jesus." It has been suggested that Bartimaeus left behind everything he had, which was nothing more than a cloak – just as Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John left their fishing nets and followed Jesus; just as Matthew left his tax booth and followed Jesus. Bartimaeus left his old life by the side of the road when he regained his sight and saw Jesus and followed him on the way.

First thing Tuesday morning, Dr. Dan texted me – "Just sent you email song Two Coats." So, I checked my emails and clicked on the YouTube link for Patty Loveless's song "Two Coats." It will probably make you think about Bartimaeus throwing off his cloak by the side of the road and finding a new life following Jesus on the way.

*Two coats were before me, an old and a new
I asked my sweet master, Oh, what must I do
The old coat was ugly so tattered and worn
The other a new one had never been worn*

*I'll tell you the best thing that I ever did
I took off the old coat and put on the new*

*The first man was earthy and made from the ground
We bore all his image the whole world around
The next was my Savior from heaven so fair
He bought me this new coat you now see me wear*

*Now this coat it suits me and keeps me warm
It's good in the winter, it's good in the storm.
My Savior has dressed me in a garment so rare
He bought me this new coat you now see me wear.*

*I'll tell you the best thing that I ever did
I took off the old coat and put on the new.*

“Open the eyes of my heart, Lord, open the eyes of my heart, I want to see you, I want to see you.”

“I have finally found a place to live in the presence of the Lord.”

“Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found; was blind, but now I see.”

Let us pray: Great God, through Jesus Christ, open our eyes so that we may see: open the eyes of our mind to learning and understanding; open the eyes of our heart, to love and compassion; open the eyes of our soul, to see Jesus and follow him on the way. Amen.

NOTES

¹Timothy Adkins-Jones, “More than a miracle story, this is a story of a call,” September 28, 2021 at www.christiancentury.org.

²Andrew Mead, “Christ Our Healer,” Thursday, October 21, 2021 in *These Days: Daily Devotions for Living by Faith* (Louisville: Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2021).