

"Believing is Seeing"

Let me share a story with you. Here is an AP news release from Duluth, Minnesota. The headline reads: "Man guilty of DWI in Lazy Boy."

The article goes on to explain that a Minnesota man pleaded guilty to riding his motorized Lazy Boy chair while intoxicated. After leaving a local bar, he got in his chair and promptly crashed into a parked vehicle. Police said the chair was powered by a converted lawn mower engine and had a stereo and cup holder. He was sentenced to six months of community service.

There is a familiar saying, "Seeing is believing," meaning if you've witnessed something then it must be true. I'm sure if anyone of us was in that parking lot and saw a motorized Lazy Boy flying 30 mph into the side of a parked car we'd be questioning if what we saw was real. However, if by through further investigation of the motorized furniture you would learn it had cup holders and a stereo applied to it, then you must believe that what you saw was real, because you just cannot make that up. That's so inventive, I might even look into getting one myself.

It's true, seeing is believing, but in spiritual matters that is not necessarily true. Sometimes skeptics will say, "Show me a miracle and I'll believe." But even if they saw a genuine miracle, they'd still doubt it or look for a naturalistic explanation and find other reasons to continue in their unbelief. And even still, not all who saw Jesus' miracles in person believed in Him, just as not all today who read the eyewitness accounts of Jesus' miracles in the Gospels believe in Him.

But, how awesome is this eyewitness story from Mark! A blind man, forced to beg because of his disability, hears that Jesus is coming. He shouts out, "Jesus, Son

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of David, have mercy on me!" Jesus hears him, calls him, heals him. It says, "**Immediately**, the man regains his sight and follows Jesus."

Isn't that the best story you've ever heard? A story of restored sight, of one who is determined to speak up for himself despite all naysayers, a story of one who finds community in the companionship of Jesus' followers. "Let me see again!" the blind man pleads. And he does. A miracle is performed and is done instantly.

On one level, this story of blind Bartimaeus is very simple and straightforward. Bartimaeus has heard of Jesus. There has been much talk in his village of the new rabbi's preaching and teaching and especially his healing. Based on what Bartimaeus has heard, he has come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the "Son of David." When he hears that Jesus has come to his town, Bartimaeus makes sure he is in a position to meet him.

As Jesus comes near, Bartimaeus *makes his presence known*, shouting out his belief that Jesus is the Chosen One, that he is a direct descendent from King David, that Jesus is the fulfillment of prophecies foretold. Although Bartimaeus has never seen Jesus, his whole being cries out in desperation that He is the Messiah the prophets spoke of and is now asking him for mercy. The usual group of "protocol police" try to get the unruly beggar to hush – but he simply will not be quiet. Bartimaeus continues to shout, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me! Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!". Jesus hears him and tells the people to let him through. When Bartimaeus comes, Jesus commends his faith and heals him.

It's a simple story, one that follows a pattern we have seen so many times in the stories of Jesus. Except for the fact that Mark gives the blind beggar a name, and

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that the name is a Hebrew-Greek combination (bar-Timaeus, or “son of Timaeus”), there is nothing very unusual or noteworthy about this story.

Well, nothing except a life that is changed **forever**. I’m not talking about Bartimaeus being healed of blindness, though that is, in and of itself, quite spectacular. No, I’m talking about a person finding something to give his life to. I’m talking about a person who begins to see, not only physically, but also spiritually. I’m talking about a person who has found a cause to which he can give his life. For, not only did “blind Bartimaeus” become “seeing Bartimaeus,” but inactive and stationary Bartimaeus became active and purposeful Bartimaeus, following Jesus “on the way,” that is: the way of the cross.

Realizing that there are no real throw-away lines in the Gospel stories, knowing that everything was included by the evangelist to make a theological point, to have a spiritual impact – we must listen carefully to verse 50: “So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus.”

“Throwing off his cloak” – what might that mean? Remember how frequently in the Bible clothing represents one’s life, one’s character or one’s spirituality. Not just Paul’s “helmet of salvation” and “breastplate of righteousness” but references to “unshrunk cloth on an old cloak” and or arriving at the feast wearing the wrong wedding garments. “Throwing off his cloak” is an image of the radical repentance that leads to new life in Christ. Throwing off one’s old life, shedding an old skin, leaving safety behind, realizing that there is something greater and more important than our own simple survival, all that is tied up in those few words, “throwing off his cloak.”

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Then there is “sprang up.” Mark’s Gospel begins not with a Christmas story but with John the Baptist and the baptism of Jesus. By verse 10 we have Jesus coming up out of the water. Baptism by immersion is an image of being buried with Christ and rising with Christ – coming up out of the water as one will come up out of the grave. “Dying and rising with Christ” is Mark’s primary image of the Christian life. Over and over we hear Jesus tell the disciples, “the Son of Man will suffer and die and rise again” and “any who will come after me must take up a cross and follow.” It is in that light that we must listen carefully to the words in verse 50 – “Throwing off his cloak he sprang up and came to Jesus.” Blind Bartimaeus not only regained his sight, he found his life, his way, his meaning, his purpose, to which he could give himself – mind, body and soul.

The Rev. Michael Curry was recently elected the presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church. He is the first African American to hold that office. He tells this story about a childhood conversation with his father, a Baptist minister:

“When my siblings and I were little children, my father sat us down one evening to talk. We knew something was up. My father and other clergy had led some local efforts for civil rights. That night, Daddy told us he might have to go to jail the next day because he was going to be a part of a protest. Then he told us something I still remember: “You must always be willing to give yourself for a higher cause. Our lives are part of something greater than ourselves.” (“Crazy Christians,” p. 14)

Too often we, like Bartimaeus, are both blind and faithful, sick unto death and yearning for life, full of hope and dread in almost equal measure. We are indeed

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“saint and sinner at the same time,” and yet, there is hope, real hope, true hope. For there is Christ. Because there is Immanuel, and true to the very core in what Immanuel means, God **IS** with us.

And though there may be many things that hold us back, Jesus hears our hearts and knows our minds and invites us to come. It is an invitation, not a demand, we are ***invited*** to throw off the cloak of our old lives, our old fears, our old regrets, our old worries, our old hesitations, and even our old lamentations and limitations. We are invited to spring up, lifting both our hands and our hearts to God. We are invited to give our lives to something more, something higher, something greater than mere survival. We are invited to take up our cross and join Bartimaeus and millions of others in following Jesus on the way – on the way of love and compassion and self-sacrifice, the way of serving our neighbor and our world through healing the sick, caring for the downtrodden, and bearing each other's burdens.

Let us pray. Holy One, we do believe that your love extends to the whole world, to every person, and into every situation. We believe that you are everywhere present, working with all creation for its redemption. Help us to see, God. Help us to see--with open eyes and open hearts--help us to see the broken places of the world. And at the same time, help us to see--always--resurrection. Amen.