

*Radiant Faith*

**Pentecost 21 ~ October 25, 2009**

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**Psalm 34:5** The faces of those who look to God are radiant.

**Mark 10:46-52 (a compilation of the NRSV and The Message)**

They spent some time in Jericho. As Jesus was leaving town, trailed by his disciples and a parade of people, a blind beggar by the name of Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus, was sitting alongside the road. When he heard that Jesus the Nazarene was passing by, he began to cry out, "Son of David, Jesus! Mercy, have mercy on me!" Many tried to hush him up, but he yelled all the louder, "Son of David! Mercy, have mercy on me!"

<sup>49-50</sup>Jesus stopped in his tracks. "Call him here."

They called him. "It's your lucky day! Get up! The master's calling you!" Throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus.

<sup>51</sup>Jesus said, "What do you want me to do for you?"

The blind man said, "Rabbi, I want to see."

<sup>52</sup>"On your way," said Jesus. "Your faith has saved and healed you." Immediately Bartimaeus regained his sight and followed Jesus on the way.

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“Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in his wonderful face, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace.” Ah yes, and the faces of those who look to God are radiant! That’s what the psalmist tells us this morning in the 5<sup>th</sup> verse of Psalm 34. What a wonderful image for those who put their faith and trust in God. Radiant faith!

Earlier in October at our monthly staff meeting, Lisa Smith, Anne Bennett, Charles Turner, Nancy Rexford and I reflected on the meaning of faith. Nancy shared her thoughts as she led us in devotions. She had recently composed this mornings anthem that the Senior Choir will sing and had given a lot of thought to what it means to have faith. As we talked we made the distinction between faith as belief and faith as trust. We all agreed that faith as belief means that one subscribes to a particular theology as defined by a creed or catechism. In contrast, faith as trust comes from the heart and does not require a prescribed set of beliefs.

It is faith as trust that this morning’s story about Bartimaeus illustrates. And I would be bold to suggest that such faith requires courage, choice and commitment. Let’s let Bartimaeus’ story teach us about radical, radiant faith.

For a long time, Bartimaeus had been an outcast in his society, for in the context of first century Jewish life, his blindness was considered punishment for a sin he had committed or a sin of his ancestors. Excluded from life, he was among the second class citizens of his day, a mere beggar by the side of the road, huddled in his cloak which was his source of protection and warmth.

And that's where we meet him in today's gospel lesson, sitting by the roadside. But this blind beggar demonstrates amazing courage when, hearing that Jesus is passing by, begins to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, mercy, mercy, have mercy on me!" So bold is his faith that he not only hails Jesus but actually calls him "Son of David" which is a royal epithet that could have been construed as treason by a nervous government. Courageous Bartimaeus! Here's someone who has radical faith in Jesus' power and authority.

Once again, Jesus' disciples are portrayed as foils to the truth. It is as if this blind man "sees" Jesus true identity more clearly than the disciples who have sight but are still blind to Jesus' messiahship. This time they order Bartimaeus to be quiet. They try to "hush him up." They still don't seem to understand that it is the people like Bartimaeus, the outcasts, the sinners, the sick, the oppressed that Jesus loves the most!

But Bartimaeus is not about to be silenced. With even greater courage he shouts even louder. "Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me!"

Jesus responds to this blind beggar. He stops in his tracks and tells his disciples "Call him here to me."

The disciples do as they are told. "Wow, man, this is your lucky day," they say to Bartimaeus. "Get up! The Master's calling to you."

And then there is this wonderful moment as Bartimaeus springs up and goes to Jesus. And as he does, he casts off his cloak. This is where Bartimaeus teaches us about the importance of choice. Bartimaeus chooses to leave his cloak behind. Think about the significance of this choice and intentional decision. This is a casting off of an object that represents all of Bartimaeus' past – his security as well as his poverty. That cloak had been his life, his bed at night, his protection from rain and cold, a covering that shielded him from ridicule and scorn. To throw off his cloak is to throw off all that has defined him and kept him safe. Now he is free. He is unencumbered for whatever new life awaits him. He took this leap of faith trusting that soon he would be able to say, "I once was blind but now I see for radiant faith illumines me."

This seemingly simple act of shedding his cloak demonstrates radiant faith because Bartimaeus recognized that he needs a power and spirit beyond his own to be made whole.

Rabbi Harold Kushner suggests that the original sin of the human condition is our illusion of self sufficiency, the audacious assumption that we can do it all, that we can be it all, that we can overcome it all, based simply on our strength and power.

Bartimaeus teaches us that we need a power and spirit beyond our own in order to be healed and made whole. The same is true for us. Only when we recognize that we need God will we

be able to make the choice of giving up the old, trusting that God will cloak us with a new and abundant future.

To throw off our cloak is to make the ultimate statement of faith. To throw off our cloak is, in the words of Susan Andrews\*, to replace the power of predictability with the power of possibility.

I wonder what cloak you and I need to discard in order to have the radiant faith of Bartimaeus? To be able to replace the power of predictability in our lives with the power of possibility? What thing? What attitude? What habit or addiction do we need to discard in order to say “Yes” to Jesus? For some it is power, for other’s it’s lack of self esteem, for others it’s greed, for still others it’s anger and resentment. Only you know what the cloak it is that needs to be discarded in your life.

For you see, it’s only after Bartimaeus has discarded his cloak that Jesus asks him, “What do you want me to do for you?” Wow! What an awesome question!

Can you allow yourself to hear Jesus asking you that question this morning? Susan, Barbara, Stan, Diane, Keith, Jo-Anne, Nancy, “What do you want me to do for you?”

“Master, let me receive my sight” says blind Bartimaeus.

What would you say to Jesus today? What do you want him to do for you? Remember, it is Jesus’ deepest desire to give you life, abundant life. Jesus doesn’t just heal souls: Jesus heals people – body, mind and spirit. Jesus wants to fulfill God’s intention at creation. Jesus wants to make everything good - very, very good.

So, what do you want Jesus to do for you this day? Do you need the gift of forgiveness? Or do you need courage? Perhaps you would ask for physical or emotional or spiritual healing? Do you need hope? Or the peace that only God can give. Jesus leaves the choice up to each one of us.

I remember well the night that Scott Stevens had to decide whether to ask God for life. Scott and his family were members of the Ballardvale United Church which I served after leaving Holy Trinity in 1988. Prior to his auto accident in 1984, Scott was the all star quarter back on the Andover High Football Team. Big, bright and sensitive about the needs of others, Scott was a popular high school Senior with teachers and peers alike.

The auto accident on the night of his Senior prom devastated Scott’s life forever. Brain injuries coupled with spinal cord injuries left him confined in a wheelchair with no voice, limited use of his hands and arms and no ability to walk, yet Scott still had a keen mind. When I met Scott in 1988 he had been through 4 years of surgeries and rehabs, and as his pastor, I soon discovered his passion for cribbage and we played for hours, Scott communicating with a computer that would speak the messages he typed in.

\*Other phrases from Susan Andrews sermon, *What Do You Want*, Lectionary Homiletics, October 1997, are quoted in this sermon.

It was minor knee surgery that brought him to the defying edge of death once again in 1993. Through a number of complications, Scott developed a serious lung infection and found himself on a ventilator, barely conscious. His parents were beside themselves. They were not ready to let him die.

“What do you want God to do for you?” I asked him. “Do you want to live? Or do you want to die?” Knowing how difficult and cruel life had been to Scott, I honestly didn’t know what this young man would choose, life or death. “Squeeze my hand, Scott” I told him, “if you want to live.” It was a very emotional moment. Tears puddle up in Scott’s eyes. The time that passed felt like an eternity. And then I felt his squeeze. With tears rolling down my cheeks, I told him that we would ask God for life. I suggested that he imagine that every breath from the respirator was breath from God, filling him with the life that he desired.

Through the night his condition improved. Scott lived. And although there can never be a complete cure for Scott, there has been incredible healing. Since that defining moment, Scott has created a printing business and he takes orders for personalized stationery, notepaper, playing cards and other items. He now lives in an independent living center for brain injured survivors and has made many gains that have improved the quality of his life. But it was only because of that single moment, when he had the radiant faith to ask God for what he needed, that the rest of Scott’s life continues to unfold.

Courage, choice and finally commitment – that’s what radiant faith is all about. Commitment comes at the end of this morning’s gospel lesson. After he receives his sight, Bartimaeus doesn’t just stand around in awe of the healing power of Christ. Bartimaeus doesn’t go back to begging on the side of the road. No! he commits to a new life. He commits to following Jesus. That’s the end of the story! Verse 52 simply reads: Bartimaeus regained his sight and followed Jesus on the way.

It’s like Bartimaeus reverses the situation. Now he is the one who asks Jesus, “What do you want me to do for you?” Bartimaeus teaches us what it means to respond to the grace that Jesus pours into our lives. We take our radiant faith out into the world, bringing the Good News of the gospel to others. Yes, God invites us to speak our need, and then to trust in the power and possibility of God’s grace to meet that need – to heal us and to make us whole so that we, like Bartimaeus can choose to follow where God leads us, to serve, maybe even to sacrifice and suffer for that which really matters. Like Bartimaeus may we be able to shout and sing,

Alive with faith, God’s holy leaven, the world I live in now is heaven.  
For when God pulled the veil away, I stepped out into glorious day.        I  
once was lost but now I see, for radiant faith illumines me.

This is the Good News of the gospel. May it be so for you and for me. Amen.