

Mark 10.46-52
Job 42.12-26
Reformation Sunday

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(A disclaimer: This sermon was written to be spoken, which does not always translate into correct grammatical form for a document written to be read.)

Take Heart

Many of you are aware of Bono and his ONE campaign¹ to make poverty history. Now he's launched a second campaign, Product Red², to eliminate HIV/AIDS in Africa.

Back in 1984, Bono's band, U2, took part in Band Aid and Live Aid—two big music projects organized to promote famine-relief efforts in Ethiopia. Afterward, Bono and his wife traveled to Ethiopia and spent six weeks working at an orphanage. Bono described his experience there: “You'd wake up in the morning...walk out of your tent and you'd count bodies of dead and abandoned children. Or worse, the father of a child would walk up to you and try to give you his living child and say, ‘You take him. If you take him he'll live. If he stays here, he will die.’”³

Now, 20 years later, Bono is mobilizing people all over the world to get involved.

Last Sunday, “60 Minutes” showed a segment called “Searching for Jacob.”⁴ Correspondent Scott Pelley traveled to Darfur in search of a young man named Jacob whose school books had been found in his burned out village and were now included in an exhibit about the Darfur genocide at the Washington, D.C. Holocaust Museum.

They found Jacob in a refugee camp in the Sahara desert—one of many where a total of 2-1/4 million people are sheltered after fleeing for their lives. Fleeing from the Janjaweed militia and the Sudanese government forces who are raping, murdering and dismembering ethnic Africans.

Maybe you've seen the horror of the 21st century's first genocide on other television programs or on the internet or read about it in print. For any of us who have seen or heard about what's going on, we can't ignore it. I for one would be glad not to know about it. I'd be more content if I hadn't seen it. But once our eyes have been opened, we see the world in a different way and, whether we like it or not, we can't ever go back to a time when we hadn't seen and we didn't know. We can say, “I chose not to do anything about it” but once we've seen it, we can't ever say again, “I didn't know.”

In our gospel reading today, Bartimaeus was physically blind. In Jesus' day, if you were blind, there was little for you to do other than be a beggar—which meant finding a spot along the side of the road and spreading out your cloak to invite coins to be tossed your way. Jericho was a good place for a beggar to spread his cloak because it was a major stop for pilgrims on their way

¹ www.one.org

² www.joinred.com

³ www.time.com/time/covers/1101020304/story.html plus conversation with John Roper who saw Bono tell this story on tv.

⁴ www.cbsnews.com/stories/2006/10/20/60minutes/main2111909.shtml

to Jerusalem to worship—and a beggar might just catch the good spirits and a generous handout from those on their way to worship in the great city.

He couldn't see Jesus, but Bartimaeus made sure everyone knew that he wanted to catch Jesus' attention. He didn't just say, "Jesus, over here!" He yelled out—twice: "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" That's not a regular nickname for Jesus. Bartimaeus has just made a highly political statement. "Son of David" means messiah and king of Israel.

Do you remember last week I talked about some of the characteristics of the Roman empire?⁵ One of the characteristics is that the rulers of the Roman empire believed themselves to be divinely appointed.⁶ If you believe that God has set you on the throne and given you charge, then you would consider it treason and blasphemy for someone—even a person as low on the totem pole as a blind beggar—to publicly proclaim someone other than the emperor as God's chosen. Jericho is not so far from Jerusalem and I'm sure, while the gospel doesn't say this out right, I'm sure that word reached the emperor's palace about what was going on in Jericho.

Jesus has the crowd call Bartimaeus and Bartimaeus threw off his cloak, sprang up and went to Jesus. Then Jesus says to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" Which I'm sure caused some eye-rolling among the crowd. Duh! Jesus! He's blind—make him see. But Jesus doesn't assume what it is that Bartimaeus wants—he lets Bartimaeus speak for himself.

This question Jesus asks Bartimaeus, "what do you want me to do for you?" is exactly the same question Jesus asks James and John in the story right before this one. (The story we heard last week.) How different the answers are to that question. The disciples ask for privilege and status; the beggar asks for vision.⁷ And it is vision that Jesus can grant—but he tells the disciples it is not his to grant privilege and status—that is for God to give.

Then the beggar by the side of the road, who now can see, leaves his cloak—his source of income and probably his only possession—he throws it off and follows Jesus. An astute hearer of Mark's gospel will remember that just a couple stories earlier, a man with many possessions walked away from Jesus' call to follow because he was dearly attached to the things he owned. The rich man—who Mark doesn't name but who is someone at the top of the social scale—rejects Jesus' specific call to follow and walks away downcast. The beggar—who lives at the margins yet whose name is remembered in this story—springs up and follows Jesus on the way, without even waiting for Jesus to say, "follow me."⁸

When Jesus hears Bartimaeus calling out to him, he has the crowd call the blind man. They say to Bartimaeus, "Take heart; get up, he is calling you." And you know that word "heart" is also related to the word "courage." So at the same time they were saying "take heart—be glad" they were also saying "take courage—don't be afraid."

⁵ See "Living Free" preached on October 22, 2006.

⁶ David Griffin, *Christian Faith and the Truth Behind 9/11 – A Call to Reflection and Action*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006, p108.

⁷ Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man – A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988, p282.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p282.

Bartimaeus will need courage. Because he's following Jesus and the next stop is Jerusalem. They are going to Jerusalem for the great Passover celebration—giving thanks for God's liberating power. But you and I know what also happens in Jerusalem. It is where Jesus will be killed. But Bartimaeus doesn't know that yet.

Bartimaeus will also need heart. The grace to keep his heart open to love despite the terrible things that will happen. The natural tendency most of us have when terrible things happen is to close our hearts because we think that will keep us from being vulnerable. The grace we need is to keep our hearts open in order to stay connected to life and to love, despite the pain.

I wonder sometimes if Bartimaeus will wish he hadn't seen what he will see. Will he wish his eyes hadn't been opened? Would he have leapt up quite so quickly and followed if he knew what lay ahead?

Like Bartimaeus, when we begin to see, we need courage and we need heart. Courage, because some of what we see will shake us to our very core. Courage, because following Jesus on the way will require more of us than we have believed we could give. And heart because it will be easy for us to create distance by judging others as we try to keep ourselves from feeling the pain of the world. Pain, that certainly God feels too. We need heart like God's heart. Open to love.

For some people, when their eyes are opened, like Bono on his trip to Ethiopia, they become radicals and reformers and revolutionaries. Today is Reformation Sunday—a day that takes us back to October 31, 1517 when a Roman Catholic priest named Martin Luther posted his 95 statements of disagreement with the Roman church on the door of the church in Wittenberg, Germany.

Did he have any idea where that action would take him? And take the whole church? Perhaps if he had known, he would have just written those things in his journal and kept it tucked away.

To do what he did must have taken courage. And heart—some part of his action must have been motivated by love. A love for the church and a desire to see it be faithful. Martin Luther didn't set out to start the Lutheran church. He wanted to see the Roman Church reformed to more fully reveal God's glory—it wasn't until it became clear that change wasn't going to come in the ways he thought that he left the Roman Church and the rest...as they say, is history.

A reformation, a revolution, a radical shift comes into being when people begin to see differently. In the story of Job, everything is taken away from Job except his life. The book of Job is the first edition of *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. There is lots of wrestling in chapter after chapter about why terrible things happen to Job and what he has done—or not done—to deserve it. In the final chapters, God responds directly to Job and assures him that God does, indeed, care for him and all of creation—even when that care is far beyond human comprehension.

What interests me in this text paired with the story of Bartimaeus is at the end. Job says to God, "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you." Job discovers a deeper and clearer vision of God. And when God restores Job's fortune, there is this little bit at the very end of the story where we are told Job is given seven sons and three daughters. And we learn the names of the three daughters. We don't know the sons' names but we hear the names of the girls: Jemimah, Keziah, and Kerenhappuch. To name those three women is remarkable when

so few women throughout the bible are given names. And then, even more remarkable, their father gave them an inheritance along with their brothers. Now that didn't happen in the normal course of events. The father's inheritance goes to the sons. Why would a daughter need an inheritance when she will go to live with her husband and her husband's family? But in this story, the daughters have names and an inheritance. Honestly, that's pretty revolutionary. And it comes after Job sees God in a new way. His eyes have been opened and with that new vision, his political, economic and social choices change and change for the well-being of his whole family.

Take heart. Take courage. Jesus is calling you.

As we remember reformers and radicals and revolutionaries throughout history and in our own time, how do we hear Jesus calling us? How have our eyes been opened? What vision have we received and how will we follow the Christ—even as the road leads to Jerusalem with all its celebration and sorrow.

Take heart. Take courage.