

“Believing is Seeing”
Mark 10:46-52
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Reformation Sunday

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Although the world has changed exponentially since the earthly Jesus walked this earth, the central questions of faith have not changed at all. In the gospel of Mark, the earliest gospel written, Jesus poses two essential questions. The first question Jesus asks his followers on the way to the cross is this: “Who do you say that I am?” It is the primary question of faith, the question every person in every generation has had to answer for themselves.

It is the first question, but it is not the last. Once we have become Christian – once we have answered by claiming “Jesus Christ is my Lord” – then a second question follows on its heels. Jesus asks this of his followers: “What do you want me to do for you?” It is not the last question Jesus will ask of us ... but it is a question that sooner or later all of us have to answer.

Two weeks ago we heard the story of the rich young man who approached Jesus with a very specific request. The rich man asked him what he needed to do to earn a spot in eternal life. He already followed God’s commandments to love his neighbor; he already had every tangible sign of God’s blessing. Jesus told him that he lacked only one thing: he needed to sell what he owned and give his money to the poor, and then he would have treasure in heaven. Unclench your grasp, Jesus told him, as he tells us: unclench your grasp of anything that gets in the way of trusting the Lord. Then you will have abundant life.

Then last week we heard the story of James and John, the sons of Zebedee, who came forward to Jesus with their request. When Jesus asked them, “What do you want me to do for you?” they answered: “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” Jesus told them that their request was not his to grant. Then he took pains to explain, yet again, that greatness on the world’s terms isn’t the point of discipleship. They may say they believe in him, but they are unclear on the concept. “You know that in the world rulers exploit their power,” Jesus explained. “It is not so

among you who follow me. Whoever wishes to be great must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Aspire to greatness, Jesus tells us, but be clear that true greatness comes in the form of giving your life for the sake of others.

Today we pick up where we left off. Immediately after the story of James and John, another man approached Jesus with a request. It is a very different interaction:

They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” 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.” So throwing off his cloak he sprang up and came to Jesus. Then Jesus said to him, “What do you want me to do for you?” The blind man said, “My teacher, let me see again.” Jesus said to him, “Go; your faith has made you well.” Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

The contrast to Jesus’ other interactions is startling. Jesus’ closest followers may have claimed that they believed, but the disciples couldn’t see what was right in front of them. Bartimaeus, who had never met Jesus before, believed even without seeing. Earlier, when Jesus asked “What do you want me to do for you,” the rich man wanted to know what he must *do* to earn salvation. James and John, the sons of Zebedee, asked Jesus for greatness in glory. Bartimaeus, physically blind, saw more clearly than anyone what he most needed. He asked the Lord for *mercy*.

The questions of faith haven’t changed over time. Jesus still asks his followers, “What do you want me to do for you?” And every generation has

to answer for ourselves. It makes me stop to think what my answer would be. What *do* I want Jesus to do for me? And I wonder, for you, how you would answer. What do *you* really want from Jesus?

I suspect that just as the questions of faith haven't changed over time, our answers haven't changed much either. The desire of the rich man – to know what he could do to earn salvation - is a perennial favorite. Within a few centuries after Christ, the church herself was offering what people wanted: a list of behaviors to insure eternal life. Prayers, holy days, fasting, and especially financial gifts were offered as a means of grace. The most egregious example came in the purchase of indulgences – that practice by which a Christian made a financial contribution to the church in exchange for a shorter time for themselves or their loved one in purgatory. We have always wanted to take salvation into our own hands, so we can control and clutch whatever it is we think will make us whole.

And the desire of James and John – to win greatness based on the world's metrics – is also a recurring theme. It did not take long for the church to buy in, especially after Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the empire. Christians' desire for power and recognition quickly set up a hierarchy within the church: lay people at the bottom, then priests, then bishops, then cardinals, then the pope. Eventually the empire and the church were so entwined that powerful families could buy their way into church hierarchy. The technical term is simony: the practice of buying and selling church positions.

“What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus asks us. The answers haven't changed much: like the rich man, we want to know what to do to earn salvation; like James and John, we want greatness and glory on the world's terms. But like blind Bartimaeus, sometimes we find a different answer on our lips: sometimes we confess our deepest need, our need for God's life-giving mercy.

Five hundred years ago, Martin Luther was reading Paul's letter to the Galatians when he finally understood – he finally *saw* – his need for God's mercy above all else. He wept when he discovered that Scripture had held the key all this time: God's mercy was Christ's gift to us through the cross. Faith alone let God's love open the door to our hearts. Nothing else could be added. Luther wrote, "If I could perform any work acceptable to God and deserving of grace ... why should I stand in need of the grace of God and the suffering and death of Christ? Christ would be of no benefit to me. Christ's mercy would be of no use to me."¹ Instead, Christ's mercy was everything to him. Luther also saw clearly for the first time that greatness in the world's eyes meant nothing to Christ, and hierarchy according to the world's terms had no place in Christ's church. All who sincerely serve the Lord and love our neighbor are truly great. "The priesthood of all believers" is how Luther voiced it.

Today, on Reformation Sunday, we remember that the Reformers – Luther, Zwingli, Calvin and others – were not out to break with the Catholic Church. Instead they longed for everyone to see what they for the first time understood: the abundant mercy of the Lord is Christ's free gift to us. "Who can adequately express the boon that comes to a person when he has the heart-assurance that God will ... forever be merciful to him for Christ's sake?" Martin Luther asked.² That "heart-assurance" is ours for the asking.

"Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me," the blind man cried. And in answer he heard these words: "Take heart; get up; he is calling you."

This week our beloved Libby Faulks went into the hospital for brain surgery. There were three lesions the doctors sought to remove; they were able to take the largest one with ease; the second one was much more difficult; and the last one, the smallest one, was buried so deep that it was completely inaccessible. Still, the surgery was deemed successful, and it was just a matter of healing. But Libby did not rally; instead, she continued to slide into a

¹ Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians (1535) by Martin Luther, Translated by Theodore Graebner (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1949) Chapter 2, pp. 60-68, <http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/luther/gal/web/gal2-14.html>

² <http://trinitypastor.wordpress.com/2008/08/14/martin-luther-galatians-51-13/> - Gal.5:1-13

deeper exhaustion, increasingly unresponsive. The doctors went in again to replace the shunt, in case it was defective; it was not. They went in a third time to put in a larger valve so that her spinal fluid could drain properly. It worked like a charm. That night she was responsive and aware; by the next day she was sitting up in a recliner, eating her lunch, and joking with the nurses. We had our old Libby back. And then, her recovery reversed itself again. Yesterday was a steady slide downward. As of last night she was almost completely unresponsive. It is very, very hard to watch.

And yet Libby would not want us to fear for her. Before she went in for surgery she said with complete peace and conviction, “I am not afraid. I know that God is near me.” In spite of all the struggles Libby has faced through her life, she has had no doubt whatsoever that God’s spirit is holding her close. She knows the love of God through the prayers of her church, which is like a second family to her. And she is not afraid to call on Christ her Lord, for she knows the deep peace of knowing God’s mercy.

“Faith,” John Calvin said, “faith is not a naked knowledge of God’s truth; nor is it a simple persuasion that God is; but a sure knowledge of God’s mercy, which is received from the gospel, and brings peace, and rest to the mind.”³

What would it mean for you to ask for the mercy of the Lord? What would it look like? What do you most deeply desire from the Lord, what tenderness and affection, what healing and wholeness, what guidance and light? In a moment, our choir will sing a beautiful anthem, Mendelsohn’s “Te Deum.” This inspiring piece is filled with the joy of God’s praise. It closes with the heartfelt prayer: have mercy on us, O Lord; have mercy on us.

As we listen to the choir sing the “Te Deum,” I invite you to ponder Jesus’ question for you, the question that sooner or later each one of us must answer. “What do you want me to do for you?” Then listen; and take heart. For he is calling you. Amen.

³ http://www.ligonier.org/publishing_teachingseries_calvin_quotes.php

