

Let Me See
Sunday, October 25, 2015
Mark 10.46-52
Pentecost +22
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We have reached the time in October when I begin counting back to what the Lott family was doing in October 2013. It was two years ago today that a moving company marked off half of our Richmond, Virginia, street for its monstrous moving truck. To tell the truth, that was actually their second attempt at loading our house. When they arrived on the 24th, the driver determined we had another day's worth of packing to do before we would be ready and came back on the 25th. That was a dark day. But pack we did, and on October 25, 2013, slowly, room by room, three movers, Nathan, and I numbered and loaded our worldly belongings into compartment one of that truck before it made its way to a few other homes then slowly unloaded each family along the Southward drive to New Orleans. We had another week before we'd leave Richmond, but our beds and chairs and plates were all somewhere on I-95 making the 1004 mile trek from Fendall Avenue to Panola Street. Fortunately, a friend's family had a well-appointed guest home available, and we moved into our transitional housing that night for the last days in the RVA.

Halloween is the time I miss them the most. Most of the time our decade in Virginia almost seems like a dream, and our children already have very few memories of their early years there. It's an exciting thing to realize they'll grow up knowing New Orleans as home with the food and music and revelry, the live oak trees and pot holes and slower pace of life. But I remember those early years for them. I remember Halloween parades at the Episcopal preschool with an assortment of homemade costumes—Super Why from PBS Kids, a ladybug, a knight made out of cardboard boxes and some winter snow gear. Two years ago it was Doc McStuffins and a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle. In the busyness of the transition, we'd moved to eating off of paper plates AND buying costumes at Target. Julia walked in the school parade that Thursday, October 31, and we sang Hap Palmer's "Witches' Brew" for the sixth year in a row. Our friends all came to the guest house that night as we ate pizza, gave out candy, took the kids trick-or-treating and tried to delay that last goodbye as late as we could. It was one of the hardest things I've ever done, saying goodbye to that place and those friends and our 100-year-old house with its leaks and creaks and that good life we knew.

And yet...I wanted to see. I wanted to see your faces. I wanted to see what it was like to stand in this pulpit each Sunday. I wanted to see what we could do together in this place. I wanted to see what God might be dreaming for us and what might happen when we say "yes" to the Spirit working in our midst. I wanted to see where following the Jesus Way would take us. I wanted to see who might join us on this journey at St. Charles. I knew I had to try. I needed to see.

Maybe you'll hear me tell this story every year in some form or maybe it will become the story I tell to my children. I'm not yet sure. At the very least, I need to remind myself every now and then of how the four Lotts got to this place of loving you, loving our city, loving this life we are building in New Orleans. Two years ago, Nathan and I took a great risk in saying goodbye to a really good life because we trusted deep within us that there was something better waiting to be discovered here. It made no sense on paper and would have made even less sense had we known all of the details. Nathan would leave his role as executive director of the Virginia Conservation Network without a new job in New Orleans, he would instead pursue a master's degree at Tulane and then, 23 months later, become the coordinator for the Greater New Orleans Water Collaborative while writing a thesis. We would lease our house in Virginia to a group of teachers and rent a home here for at least three years. We would send our children to three schools each in a mere 12 months as they went from two Richmond schools to one Catholic school to two charter schools between one August and the next.

We would also see our children stomp and clap with great hope in their team as they learned the Who Dat chant. We also see them visit regularly with their great-grandmother in Mobile who keeps her freezer stocked with favorite ice cream treats for their trips to her house. We are watching our children grow in their relationships with you as they learn this building and this community and this place as *their church, their friends, their home*. We sensed that our pull to this place was somehow linked to the forward motion of God making all things new, and we walked from a known future into a fairly uncertain future.

Every story of change has layers of risk, loss, and transition built into it. Sometimes change happens to us, other times we welcome or even seek new beginnings. I know you have these life experiences, too. I have thought often of my own story this week as I have studied the gospel text for today. This son of Timaeus plays a fixed role in his community. By the name Bartimaeus, we infer he was a Gentile. He sits at the edge of a

town where the wealthy of Jerusalem might have traveled to live in Winter months.¹ As a blind beggar, he certainly was not in the comfortable center of community, but people would have regularly passed by and provided for his basic needs. Perhaps it was not a good life, but it was a known life and a certain life.

As is often the case, Mark pairs this story with that of another to help us understand its power. In Mark's gospel Jesus is baptized and immediately Jesus is tested. Crowds gather and follow this amazing teacher and healer, yet his family does not understand him. Jesus begins teaching on the kingdom of God to multitudes who hang on his every word, and yet the disciples who follow him daily cannot comprehend what he is teaching.

Then in Mark 10 a rich man comes to Jesus asking how to inherit eternal life and goes away sad because he is not willing to release anything from his old life in order to experience a new one. Then James and John, witnesses to that scene, argue for power positions at Jesus' right and left sides. It is Bartimaeus, the blind beggar on Jericho's roadside who calls out to Jesus because he wants to see.

Like the woman with the issue of blood who desperately reaches out and grabs hold of Jesus, Bartimaeus begins to yell for him. And *many* around him tell him to be quiet. To stay in his place. He sits at the margins of society, and those around him perceive this reaching up beyond his place is inappropriate. But Bartimaeus won't do it. He won't obey. He won't be quiet. He won't sit and watch his one chance at transformation pass by. He gets louder. And he grows stronger. His expectation of Jesus' healing power is reflected in the power of his own voice, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

And Jesus stops walking. The blind man's voice causes Jesus to stand still, and he calls for the one who is calling for him. The scene is brilliant. Bartimaeus knows this is his moment and throws off his cloak—this protection from the elements, this garment that guards him in his waiting place—he has already thrown it aside as he runs for Jesus. And without presumption, Jesus asks, "What do you want me to do for you?"

Bartimaeus has a choice in all this. What do you want? His question reminds me of those wonderful words from Mary Oliver, "Tell me, what is it you plan to do/with your one wild and precious life?"² What do you want me to do for you, Bartimaeus. You've already thrown off your cloak. Say the words. What happens next?

¹ thought originated from discussion on http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1488

² Mary Oliver, "The Summer Day"

And just like that, Bartimaeus can see on every level, and we understand that he took the chance the rich man wouldn't take. And he hears Jesus' teaching in the way that James and John don't. And immediately he regains his sight and follows Jesus on the way.

It's Reformation Sunday for many churches, particularly in the Lutheran tradition, and congregations are celebrating the work of Martin Luther and many others who broke from Catholicism and challenged certain practices of 16th century Christianity some 500 years ago. We remember that they spoke of salvation by grace through faith. They questioned the limits of power for the pope and for priests. They spoke of the individual's responsibility in matters of faith. They challenged strongly held notions on heaven, hell, and purgatory.

We remember the romance of speaking truth to power and the gifts of freedom they passed on to us. But the losses were tremendous, and the transition was long. On personal levels, there were excommunications. Men and women were cut off from community for challenging the accepted teaching of the Church. On larger levels, great violence and war changed every aspect of life.

When we want to see life in a new way, there will be losses. We must throw off some kind of cloak first—a cloak of certainty, comfort, known routine. The bigger the change, the more we must release to really see the way forward. Mark gives us a couple of options—we can hold onto what we know and go away sad or we can throw off that old cloak and run toward new life.

We know this is true individually. Choosing the sight of Bartimaeus is also powerfully true for the 21st century Church. George Bullard writes extensively on the current transition we are experiencing as Church. Perhaps this is not Protestant Reformation level change, but we are in the throes of a transition that we may only understand 30 or 50 years from now. In his column for Baptist News Global, he is writing weekly about the need for vision in churches—what kind of sight do we church folk have?

Bullard writes, "Vision is more about the pulling of God into the future than the pushing of humankind to do better each year. We all want to succeed at whatever we do. We all want to do better next year than we did this year or last year. But, God wants more from us. We focus on short-term fixes. God focuses on long-term solutions. It is not that God is pushing us and putting external stress on us. It is that God is gently pulling us forward... True vision continually images the congregation in the image of

God. Like a master artist God creates an ever clearer image for a congregation with ever sharper high definition."³

On our own and as a people, we have so many choices. Which ones pull us farther onto the Jesus Way, farther into the ways of God? Do you want to see? Are you moving blindly through your life? Are you holding onto old habits and old ways and old relationships simply because they comfort you? Imagine your moment on the roadside before Jesus. What do you want him to do for you? Are you hoping to inherit greatness without cost to your life and your habits? Are you ready to run toward your future and leave behind the cloak that no longer serves? My friends, which will it be? Which will you choose?

³ <https://baptistnews.com/perspectives/the-only-vision-that-works-for-congregations-is-gods-vision/>