

Lectionary 30 10.28.18

Mark 10:46-52

Focus Statement: Jesus gives us courage (if not always clear vision).

It's Reformation Day! If you're new to the Lutheran tradition, or even if you're not, you may be wondering why everyone's wearing red, why there are red streamers on the chairs for you to wave around, and what any of this means. So, quick history lesson. Every five-hundred years or so, the church, and by church I mean the whole church, like Christianity as a collective, undergoes a major shift. Two-thousand years ago, that shift was the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Which is THE shift, the one that changed human history both before and after. From that, five-hundred years later we get the Great Fall, the fall of the Roman Empire, and the disintegration of the Imperial Church established under Emperor Constantine. Then, five-hundred years after that, the Great Schism, where the Eastern and Western churches split. Five hundred years later, on October 31st, 1517, is the shift we're celebrating today, when a German monk named Martin Luther felt that the Church had moved away from its mission to proclaim the unconditional grace and love of God for all people, and started an effort to reform the Church. That movement led to what is known as the Great Reformation. I'm tempted to go into more detail on this, because I'm a nerd, but this is a sermon and I only have twelve to fifteen minutes, so I'm going to leave it as a flyover view, but please, ask me more later, because I love to talk history. But, one of the big ideas that Luther championed was that we can never obey God's law enough to earn our salvation. Every one of us is a sinner, every one of us is broken. Yet, also, because of what Jesus did for us at the cross, we are, to quote Paul, "united with Christ in a death like his, [and] we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his." Meaning, because of God's grace and forgiveness we are set free from the bonds of sin and death, we are set

free from our brokenness, and are children of God, a part of God's family, and therefore also saints. Ready for your fancy, churchy phrase for the week? The official theological term for this is *simul justus et peccator*, "simultaneously saint and sinner," we are one-hundred percent of both, all of the time. Nadia Bolz Weber, a theologian I love so much I've got the council reading her book for the rest of the year, talks about how this is why Lutheran theology makes sense to her, because the idea that we are both saint and sinner is the best explanation she's heard for her own experience of being alive in this world, of how she is simultaneously capable of doing horrible things, of hurting people, of overlooking the needs of others, of being selfish, and greedy, and mean, and, insert your vice here, I can certainly insert mine, and yet at the same time she is also capable of incredible goodness. Of loving people she didn't think she could love, of caring for others, of putting others needs above her own.

Our Gospel reading for this morning has that idea of *simul justus et peccator*, simultaneously saint and sinner, buried right in it. But you have to have a better grasp of ancient Biblical languages than I do to catch it, so thank God for super smart people who publish commentaries. The reading tells us that the name of the blind man who was healed is "Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus." Which if you read Hebrew is a bit of Department of Redundancy Department, because the prefix "bar" in Hebrew means "son." So in Hebrew, verse forty-six names this man, "Son of Timeaus, Son of Timaeus." But Mark wasn't written in Hebrew, though much of his Jewish audience would have spoken it, it was written in Greek. And Timaeus sounds a lot like the Greek word "timaioi," which means "highly prized." So we've got Greek, we've got Hebrew, but there was a third language that was

commonly spoke in first century Palestine, Aramaic. And Timaeus also sounds like the Aramaic word “tame” which means “unclean.” So we’ve got some wordplay here, Bartimaeus echoes both “unclean” and “highly prized.” Both, given the theology of the time, sinner and saint. It’s important also to remember that Mark very rarely named the person Jesus was healing in the Gospel. So that Mark chose name Bartimaeus means we are meant to pick up on the double meaning.

So Jesus and his disciples came to Jericho, about twenty miles outside of Jerusalem and, more importantly, their last stop before Jesus triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, when they came across Bartimaeus, a blind beggar sitting along the side of the road. And Bartimaeus may have been blind, but he was not mute. Because immediately, “when he heard that it was Jesus he began to shout out and say, ‘Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.’” “Have mercy on me.” What a different request Bartimaeus had for Jesus than James and John from last week, “grant us to sit... in your glory,” or the rich man from three weeks ago, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Bartimaeus asked for mercy and to be able to see. And Jesus granted Bartimaeus’s request. Again, just as Jesus had with the rich man, whose question he answered, and with James and John, who he assured would drink the same cup and be baptized with the same baptism. Yet look at the difference in the responses. The rich man went away grieving, for he didn’t think he could live up to what Jesus was asking. James and John didn’t understand what they’d asked for; though history tells us they did live up to it. But Bartimaeus, when he was told, “Go, your faith has made you well,” did the opposite. Instead of going, he followed; he joined the throngs who

lined the roads into Jerusalem, waving branches and shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David.”

There’s another piece that asks us to read this story as the corollary to last week’s James and John story, and it’s the question Jesus posed. To both James and John and to Bartimaeus, Jesus asked, “what do you want me to do for you?” I read these two stories as both hope and challenge. Hope because, yet again the disciples are giving us the example of what not to do. Don’t follow Jesus as a way to fame and fortune, because that’s not where this train was headed, at least, not as the world defined it. But for all the disciples got it wrong, over and over and over again, Jesus kept them around, he loved them, he forgave them, he encouraged them, and eventually James and John got there, it just took them a while. In Mark’s Gospel the disciples function as this constant reminder to the reader that if the disciples missed the boat that many times while literally walking behind Jesus, certainly Jesus isn’t giving up on you either. And while the disciples are hope, we can’t misunderstand as badly as they did, Bartimaeus is challenge. Because Bartimaeus exemplifies the right response, the request for mercy, the courage to jump to Jesus’ invitation, the risk to ask for what was needed, and then ignoring the offer to go, choosing instead to follow.

To recap, every five-hundred years or so the church goes through a major shift, a shift so cataclysmic that those in the midst of it are led to wonder if the church will even survive. And if you were following along with my history lesson you might have caught that I said that the shift we’re celebrating today happened five-hundred and one years ago. Which

means friends, we are yet again in the middle of just such a shift. If things feel unsteady right now, that fits the pattern. The Great Fall, The Great Schism, The Great Reformation, and theologian Phyllis Tickle named this time in our history as well, the Great Emergence. From each of those shifts the church emerged not as it had been before, but different, remade, renewed. We don't know where we're going, we don't know what church is going to look like when we get to the other side of this. But on Reformation we remember, and we celebrate, that Luther really didn't know either, but he had the courage to risk reformation anyway. He captured this in one of his evening prayers, where he wrote, "O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord." For me, this prayer captures the heart of the Reformation, and the heart of our work as people still being reformed, to step out with courage, on paths we don't know, trusting that God is guiding us. At times in my life where I have felt lost, that prayer and another one by Thomas Merton that literally starts, "My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going..." are the words that have given me comfort and the courage to go forward, even as I did not know where the path might lead.

So it's Reformation Sunday, but it's also Consecration Sunday, the Sunday when we set aside time to make financial pledges, to take the time to think about, and write down, how much we are financially going to be able to give to the work of God through the church this year. I love that the last few years these two Sundays have overlapped, because I think there are few examples of stepping forward in courage, few actions more requiring of

uncertain risk, then making a financial pledge for an entire year. Because a year is a super long time. And we have no idea what that year might bring. You might make a pledge you intend to keep, and then something changes in your life and you are unable to meet the amount you wrote down. Or, in reverse, you might walk out the door today and discover you won the however many billion dollar Powerball and your pledge is suddenly incredibly low-balled. Which, by the way, if you win the Powerball, I'm not asking for a full ten-percent, but I'd love enough to buy and maintain Triangle in perpetuity. Just throwing that out there... I'll also add that when you see the card, you'll notice there's a sentence at the bottom reminding you that this is an estimate of your intended giving, and you are free to raise or lower it at any time. I'm not asking you to sign a binding contract; I'm never even going to see your pledge card. This is between you and God. I'm asking you to write something down because we humans are physical beings; the physical action of writing things down is important and meaningful. But point is we have this card and we really have no idea what the year ahead might hold. Yet every year we do this anyway, as an experience at stepping out in faith, at risking something for the sake of God's work in this place, and in gratitude for all that we have received. No, my two-hundred and thirty-one dollars a pay period is not a reformation. Unlike Luther, the world is not shifting on its axis because I'm turning a card in. At least, I don't think it is. But Luther didn't know he was shifting the world when he asked the questions of the Ninety Five Theses. And, he alone didn't shift the world anyway, he started it and then the Holy Spirit took Luther's action, and crazy and wonderful things followed.

So, dear friends, dear people of God. Let's be bold. Let's be bold as individuals, but let's be bold as a congregation, as the church of God in this place. Because stewardship doesn't end with putting these cards in the basket, it is then up to us to put our gathered giving into action, to move these pledges from this basket, from these doors, and out into the world. Bartimaeus didn't stop when he received healing; he followed Jesus to Jerusalem and saw the world made new. And making this promise to give of our money, while maybe the hard part, is really not the best part, the best part is when the Holy Spirit puts these pledges at work to shift the axis of the world in a million large and small ways. Because guess what friends, that is already happening. I wish you could be a fly on the wall for one day of what I get to do in this place, what your diligent support of this congregation year after year, has allowed me to be a part of. Not a day goes by that someone doesn't stop me in the hall to ask for prayer, share a story, or tell me of how God is at work in their lives because you have made this space possible. The Reformation has started dear people, let's follow the leading of our brother Bartimaeus, both unclean and highly beloved, and step forward in courage. Because Jesus is going ahead of us, and all history tells us is whatever is coming next is better than we could ever imagine. Amen.