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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado  
Proper 25 (Pentecost 22), Series B  
Saturday, October 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2021  
Sunday, October 24<sup>th</sup>, 2021

Sermon: A Beggar's Faith  
Text: Mark 10:17-22

Focus: Jesus heals our spiritual blindness by his mercy and grace.

Function: That they would see Jesus.

Structure: Story-Framed

Locus: "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him, but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel..." (SC, 3<sup>rd</sup> Article of Apostles' Creed).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. Do you ever wonder what happened to the people Jesus healed during his earthly ministry? The Gospels tell us how he healed the deaf and lame, cleansed the lepers, drove out demons, gave sight to the blind, and even raised the dead. So what was life like for those people afterwards? Prior to meeting Jesus, many of them were beggars—like Blind Bartimaeus in our Gospel lesson today. Others of them lived with aging parents.

But how did their lives change? I hope they didn't go back to begging, although it may have been difficult to line up a new job without a resume or letters of reference. After all, what trade could a formerly lame man ply? Could a formerly blind man perhaps paint houses? I would *love* to see a formerly deaf or mute woman serving as a cantor in the synagogue—or playing guitar in the praise band! Hopefully, she wouldn't be "tone deaf," as they say.

In her book, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Annie Dillard describes the observations made by doctors who performed operations on people with cataracts. She writes:

“I chanced on a wonderful book by Marius von Senden, called *Space and Sight*. When Western surgeons discovered how to perform safe cataract operations, they ranged across Europe and America operating on dozens of men and women of all ages who had been blinded by cataracts since birth. Von Senden collected accounts of such cases; the histories are fascinating.<sup>1</sup>

What would it be like suddenly to be moved from darkness into light, to have the curtain pulled back and for a whole new world to confront your vision?

According to Dillard, “For the newly sighted, vision is pure sensation unencumbered by meaning.”<sup>2</sup> We forget what we learned as babies—the special relationships between objects. For example, smaller objects can “hide” behind bigger ones, but they do not simply cease to exist. We take for granted that objects appear smaller the further off they are removed from us. We understand that objects are not flat, and shadows help to define their shape for our vision. Where before the formerly blind navigated the world by smell, taste, and touch, now the power of sight overwhelms their other senses, and they have to relearn what things are. “In general,” Dillard writes, “the newly sighted see the world as a dazzle of color-patches. They are pleased by the sensation of color, but the rest of seeing is tormentingly difficult.”<sup>3</sup>

Do you remember the blind man whom Jesus healed by stages in Mark 8? At first, Jesus spit on his eyes and laid hands on him. But when Jesus asked if he could see anything, he answered, “I see people, but they look like trees, walking” (Mark 8:24, ESV).<sup>4</sup> So Jesus again laid hands on the man, and this time “his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly” (v. 25). How marvelous that even some of Jesus’ miracles didn’t take at first!

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<sup>1</sup> Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, in *Three by Annie Dillard* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990), 31.

<sup>2</sup> Dillard, *Tinker Creek*, 32.

<sup>3</sup> Dillard, 33.

<sup>4</sup> All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

Apparently, the sudden ability to see is quite overwhelming at first, and some of the formerly blind actually wish that their newly gained sight could be taken away again!

“The mental effort involved in these reasonings prove overwhelming for many patients. It oppresses them to realize, if they ever do at all, the tremendous size of the world, which they had previously conceived of as something touchingly manageable. It oppresses them to realize that they have been visible to people all along, perhaps unattractively so, without their knowledge or consent. A disheartening number of them refuse to use their new vision, continuing to go over objects with their tongues, and lapsing into apathy and despair. ‘The child can see, but will not make use of his sight. Only when pressed can he with difficult be brought to look at objects in his neighborhood; but more than a foot away it is impossible to bestir him to the necessary effort.’ Of a twenty-one-year-old girl, the doctor relates, ‘Her unfortunate father, who had hoped for so much from this operation, wrote that his daughter carefully shuts her eyes whenever she wishes to go about the house, especially when she comes to a staircase, and that she is never happier or more at ease than when, by closing her eyelids, she relapses into her former state of total blindness.’”<sup>5</sup>

Worse than vanity or ingratitude, some of the formerly blind begin to recognize the difference in value between different objects. “While he was blind he was indifferent to objects unless they were edible.” But now, he is given to “envy, theft, and fraud.”<sup>6</sup> That is, he has learned how to *covet things*.

I do not think that became Blind Bartimaeus’s problem or vice. Mark reports that immediately after recovering his sight from Jesus, the man “followed [Jesus] on the way” to Jerusalem. This is the language of discipleship. In the words of the old hymn: ♪ “*I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see.*” Before meeting Jesus, Bartimaeus was blind both physically *and* spiritually. He didn’t really know or understand who Jesus was or why he had come. He called him Son of David—a wonderful Messianic title, but to the Jews of Jesus’

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<sup>5</sup> Dillard, 34-35.

<sup>6</sup> Dillard, *ibid.*

day, this meant a conquering king who would drive out the Romans, not the Son of God who would die on the cross for our sins.

But Blind Bartimaeus wasn't the only blind man on the road that day. Many of the Jewish priests lived in Jericho when they were off-duty from their two (2) weeks of temple service per year (cf. Luke 1:9). (*Aside:* Wouldn't that be a great gig—only work for two weeks per year and have the other 50 weeks off on paid vacation?! I don't think your company's HR team has that in the employee manual). The priests were the ones who called the loudest for Christ's crucifixion on Good Friday. Surely, they were blind to what Jesus was doing.

And the disciples themselves were spiritually blind—even the apostles. Bible scholars point out that all three of Jesus' famous Passion Predictions, the prophecies of his betrayal, suffering, death, and resurrection, are sandwiched between two stories about the healing of blind men. The first is the healing of the blind man in Bethsaida (Mark 8:22ff). The last is the healing of Bartimaeus in our Gospel reading today. These two miracles form “bookends” (an *inclusio*) around Jesus' teachings on suffering and discipleship, wherein Jesus reveals to his disciples that he is about to suffer and die—and on the third day rise again.

Yet all they can do is deny his Word and argue about which of them is the greatest. The Twelve were completely *blindsided* by the events of holy week because not only were they spiritually blind, but their hearts and ears were deaf to what Jesus had to say. No wonder Jesus warned them: “If your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell...” (Mark 9:47).

Nevertheless, despite his political hopes for Jesus, Bartimaeus *believed* in Jesus. He had *faith*. And his faith compelled him to cry out all the more for Jesus' help despite the naysayers

who tried to make him shut up. Jesus and his entire entourage of Passover pilgrims stopped to help him. The squeaky wheel gets the grease, as they say.

“What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus asked, to which Bart replied, “Rabbi [Teacher], let me recover my sight” (v. 51). I want to see again! (*Aside*: Clearly, this man was not blind from birth but blinded by accident or disease at some later date).

And do you know what Jesus did? He *healed* him! “Go your way,” Jesus said. “Your faith has made you well” (v. 52). The same Greek word (*sōdzein*) can also mean salvation. Thus, “Go, your faith has *saved* you!” He once was lost, but now was found; was blind, but now he could see. And so he followed Jesus.

The Bible doesn’t tell us what became of Bartimaeus after that. We don’t know whether or not he went back to begging, although I doubt he did. I imagine that he took up some trade and returned to the work he did before he became blind. After all, the right response of a person made righteous by the healing Word of Christ is to *work*—to do good works in service to your neighbor out of love and gratitude for all God has done for you. “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Eph. 4:10, NIV). Christians are saved by God’s grace and called to “pay it forward” to others in need. That is why Luther calls our vocations the “masks” of God, whereby God gives us our daily bread.

Nevertheless, like many of the newly sighted people in Annie Dillard’s book, we too shy back to the darkness when we are confronted by the light of Christ and his Word. “And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and

does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed” (John 3:19-20). Though we once were blind and now we see, yet we struggle against sin until the day we die.

And so, like Bartimaeus, we must *never* stop begging for God’s mercy and grace, as we do in the *Kyrie*: Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Lord, have mercy. Amen. “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” (Mark 8:47). And he does. Jesus *does* have mercy. He never stops showing us mercy by healing our sickness and forgiving our sins. His blood never stops flowing from the cross. And no matter how many times we retreat back to the darkness like little cockroaches, nevertheless, it is never too late or too impudent for us to cry out to Jesus.

Until the day we die or Christ returns—whichever happens first—we are all blind beggars telling other beggars where to find bread. As Martin Luther wrote in his famous last words, “We are all beggars. This is true.” Ours is a beggar’s faith. In the name of T Jesus. Amen.