

***Faith Alone* – Mark 10:46-52**

Rev. Matt Nieman

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As election season unfolds, you've probably spent a good amount of time considering who you're going to vote for (or who you've already voted for if you early-voted). You've taken into account the candidates and their positions on the issues. You've weighed how much you can trust each person, the qualities and values you find in them that you think will help or hurt their abilities to lead.

As I was reading this story of Bartimaeus this week, it struck me as relevant the process by which Bartimaeus made the decision to trust in Jesus. And it's not completely unlike the process we often go through that leads us to pull the lever (or fill in the oval for) the candidates we decide to vote for.

Make no mistake, the choice to trust Jesus is on a far different plain than the choices we make in our elections. To vote, after all, is not a sacred duty but a civic duty. When we vote in elections, we are exercising our rights as a free people to choose the humans who will lead us in civic matters. To follow Jesus is a choice that reflects our spiritual needs and values. It has ramifications that run much deeper and are more significant than voting for a certain candidate at the ballot box.

Examining the story of Bartimaeus and his choosing Jesus, though, may help us as we determine who we trust, whether it be in our elected officials, our bosses in the workplace, our teachers, and our religious leaders.

Bartimaeus is blind and sitting beside the road on which Jesus walked as he entered Jericho. It was at that moment that Bartimaeus shouts, "Jesus, have mercy on me!"

Jesus requests that Bartimaeus approach him and asks him what he wants from Jesus. "Let me see again," was his request.

"Your faith has made you well," Jesus replies. And Bartimaeus immediately regained his sight and followed Jesus.

Jesus was attentive, personal, and transformative. That's not surprising. Our studies of scripture make this to be what, over time, becomes expected: Jesus using a personal touch to change the life of a suffering person and, in the course of things, making him or her a follower.

What do we learn from Bartimaeus here, though? What do we learn about him that helps us place our trust in Jesus as a leader and life-giver? If nothing else, we learn that Bartimaeus had faith in Jesus. And that faith is revealed in what Bartimaeus did.

The first thing he did is grasp who Jesus is. He addresses Jesus as "Son of David." David of course was

Israel's royal king. Bartimaeus, in using that title, reveals that he believes Jesus is God's designated agent and a royal figure. Despite his blindness, he senses that Jesus is on a special plain.

To have faith in Jesus is to at least have a sense that Jesus is different than the most ardent and wisest teacher. It's to acknowledge that he merits consideration as one who is uniquely qualified for doing extraordinary things.

For us to have faith in Jesus is to acknowledge that he's more than our local physician, as important as our physicians are. He's more than just a teacher of Biblical studies that we might find at church or in the academy. He's more than a counselor we make appointments to visit with who put us on a better path.

Jesus is different. He's the one who is uniquely able to show mercy and heal our wounds. To have faith in him means grasping that.

The second action Bartimaeus takes is persisting in this faith in Jesus despite the hindrances he faces. First, he's blind. And getting to Jesus would've been hard simply because he wasn't sighted. And then, when he is in Jesus' presence and pleads that Jesus would have mercy on him, others around him scold him for yelling out and try to keep him quiet. But he continues his shouts until Jesus invites him to come to him. He just believes that

Jesus will do something, and he persists until he gets an audience with him.

A duck waddles into a hardware store and says, "Hey, got any grapes?"

The clerk says, "No, we don't have any grapes; now get out of here!"

The duck waddles out.

A little bit later he waddles back in and says, "Hey, got any grapes?"

The clerk says, "No, I told you already, and if you ask me again, I'm gonna nail your feet to the floor!"

So the duck waddles out.

Five minutes later the duck waddles back in and says, "Hey, got any nails?"

The clerk says, "No."

The duck says, "Good, got any grapes?"

Persistence. The duck had it. And Bartimaeus had it. When it's easy to give up in our faith, our persistence will maintain it or increase it.

Here's the next thing about Bartimaeus that is so impressive in his display of faith in Jesus: He expected a transformation. He expected to be changed through his interaction with Jesus.

It's interesting that when Jesus summoned Bartimaeus to come to him, Mark tells us Bartimaeus "threw off his cloak." He was blind and a beggar.

Obviously, he expects to regain his sight, for a blind beggar would ordinarily do well to keep his possessions close at hand. He obviously expects a change in his status. When Bartimaeus casts off his cloak, he confidently guesses that he will no longer sit on his garment dependent upon handouts from passersby. He expected a change.

It's bold to expect that Jesus will cure our blindness or cancer or heart disease or loneliness or our lot in life. But having faith in him means expecting that something in us will be changed for the better—enough so that we'll have the faith to then follow him as Bartimaeus did.

Along those lines, one more thing that Bartimaeus does that reveals his faith: He asked Jesus for the right thing.

In the gospel reading from last week, James and John, when Jesus asked them what he could do for them, requested seats of honor—one on his right and the other on his left. It was a request that didn't meet the moment. Bartimaeus, on the other hand, simply requested that his sight be restored. It was simple, pertinent, and reflected Bartimaeus' belief in what Jesus could deliver. It wasn't a luxury he requested, but something basic to his livelihood, survival, and ability to follow.

So many times, we get lost in asking for the wrong things. Again, asking for a cure for our ailment seems like

a big thing to ask for. And there's no guarantee that this kind of healing will come. But our asking for the right things reveals the wholeness we seek in following Jesus, the faith we have in his ability to make us well.

Bartimaeus had faith, and that's all he needed to demonstrate for this big shift in his life to take place.

Faith is all we need too. We don't need places of honor around Jesus; we don't need riches; we don't need to do extraordinary things; we don't need to be perfect. All we need to be closer to Jesus is faith. Faith alone.

And through that regular, if arduous at times, practice of faith, Jesus is revealed to us. And isn't that ultimately what we seek—the presence of Jesus?

We've spent a good amount of time on Job in recent weeks—exploring Job's suffering, his response to his suffering, and God's response to Job. Last week, we talked about how Job wasn't capable of understanding the things of God. And neither are we. We aren't on the same plane.

And, as Frederick Buechner points out, maybe an explanation to Job of Job's suffering wouldn't have done any good anyway.

“Job would still have to face [his children's] empty chairs at breakfast every morning. Carrying in his pocket straight from the horse's mouth a complete theological

justification of his boils, he would still have to scratch and burn.

“God doesn’t reveal his grand design. He reveals himself. He doesn’t show why things are as they are. He shows his face. And Job says, “I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now my eyes see thee” (Job 42:5). Even covered with sores and ashes, he looks oddly like a man who has asked for a crust and been given the whole loaf.”

When we have faith, we see God and we, too, look oddly like a person who has asked for a crust and been given a whole loaf.

We don’t see God without that faith. And that faith becomes stronger when we grasp who Jesus is, when we are persistent in it despite hindrances, when we expect a transformation, and when we ask for the right thing.

That faith alone is all we need.