

Reforming and Transforming: Discovering our Blind Spots

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Mark 10:46-52

Reformation Sunday-Oct. 25, 2009

First Presbyterian Church
Uvalde, TX

Today is Reformation Sunday. Almost 500 years ago on the eve of All Saint's Day—A day we know as Halloween—October 31, 1517, a young Roman Catholic priest, named Martin Luther, posted on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany, a list of 95 theses, or statements, and requested a meeting of the church leaders to discuss and debate the substance of these 95 theses.

At the time, Martin Luther had no idea what drastic changes this simple act would bring upon the church, but posting those 95 theses began a chain reaction that resulted in the events we know today as the Protestant Reformation.

One important concept that came out of the Protestant Reformation—is the statement *Ecclesia Semper Reformanda*—or The Church Always Reforming. In the PCUSA Constitution in the Book of Order, our church today affirms *Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda*—that means the church reformed, always reforming, according to the word of God and the call of the Spirit.

Many of you will remember Gracie Allen, the wife and comedic partner of George Burns—she once said, "God never has a period, only a comma." I think that is one of the best translations of *Reformed and Always Reforming* that I have ever heard. God is never finished with us—we are always in need of reform. We must never stop growing, changing, re-imagining our faith and ourselves. Our faith must be a living faith addressing living issues of our day.

Our passage from Mark is a story of reformation and transformation—and a story of call. The story of Jesus healing the blind Bartimaeus is a story of faith and healing, and it is an instruction in faith for **us** as well.

Our lesson is about a faith that is living, growing, and changing to address whatever demands it may meet in our lives.

Our lesson is about a man that is transformed, not only physically, but from the inside as well—which is what real transformation is.

There is a difference between change and transformation, you know. Change is something that is external, sudden or temporary. Transformation is systemic—from within, deep-seated, and permanent. A tadpole is a good example of transformation—that tadpole will become a frog—that's permanent—it will never turn back into a tadpole. A tree can be transformed into furniture.

Change is like painting the church a different color. That color can be changed if we don't like it. Or, think about water freezing. Upon looking and feeling the ice—it seems to have transformed—but it is not permanent—we know that ice will thaw, and eventually turn back into water.

Transformation usually occurs when something has smacked us in the head about something that is dear to us and causes us to wake up. Transformation comes when there are events that occur in our lives that seem to spin the world around us. The beginning of transformation is changing attitudes and changing minds.

Our Gospel lesson starts out in darkness. It begins with the blindness of Bartimaeus who begs for transformation. It begins in emptiness, in raw need—haven't we all felt like we have been at that point in our life at one time or another? But Bartimaeus has faith—His faith is needy.

True faith is needy, at times.

True Faith is eager.

True Faith is assertive.

True Faith is hopeful.

True Faith is persistent, risky, and raw.

Bartimaeus shows us all these characteristics of faith and responds to Jesus with enthusiasm. When Jesus told the disciples to call Bartimaeus to him—Bartimaeus didn't hesitate—he threw off his cloak, jumped up and went to him.

Notice that Bartimaeus not only sprang up to go to Jesus—he threw off his cloak. The original hearers of this gospel lesson would not have missed the importance of Bartimaeus' act in *throwing off his cloak* and leaving it behind when Jesus called.

A person's cloak, in those days served many useful purposes. Your cloak kept you warm at night, it hid your head and face from bad weather, and if need be, from recognition. A cloak could serve as collateral for a loan, but your creditor had to return it to you at night to serve you as your bedding. Your cloak's decoration signaled your social importance to other people. Various ornaments on it, if you were Jewish, displayed how religious you were.

Somehow, your cloak contained your personal potency, or power, or influence.

What about us? Is there a cloak that we wear everyday? Do we have something that comforts us, sometimes keeps us from recognition—something that demonstrates to others our personal potency or strength?

What cloaks **our faith**, that in order to spring up and go to Jesus must be thrown off our backs?

Is there anger or pride?

What about the fear of feeling unworthy?

What about self-sufficiency—thinking we can do it all on our own? Maybe Martin Luther was feeling the cloak of religion--the Church with all its rules, when he posted his 95 theses.

Are there cloaks we are wearing as a congregation that are holding us back from transforming and re-imagining our congregation to reach out to the community?

Is there the cloak of "we have always done it this way" or "We're too small to accomplish anything really big?"

We **all** have cloaks we wear on our backs everyday. We all are blind in a sense to things that block our *inner* vision. Our cloaks are those things that hold us back from springing up enthusiastically to meet Jesus when he calls. Our cloaks and our blind spots are something we're tempted to clutch as an alternative to trusting Jesus with our lives and with our church (which is not really ours, you know).

Our cloaks prevent us from seeing the world as **Jesus** sees it.

What if we all had a faith like Bartimaeus? A faith that would spring up enthusiastically, a faith that would put away the blinders and throw off our old cloaks—our old way of doing things.

What if we had a Bartimaeus kind of faith that would go out of these four walls of our church building and reach others to share this good news?

What if we had a Bartimaeus faith that would lead us to BE the church in this community and not worry about our finances so much?

These are some hard questions to ask ourselves. Jesus, however, asked Bartimaeus and asks us today a very simple question... "*What do you want me to do for you?*"

How do we as a congregation answer Jesus' question?

In the simple brilliance of this question Jesus asks us, we are forced to decide what is *really* important in our individual lives and the life of this congregation.

Bartimaeus' answer is the answer of a mature faith... "*I want to see,*" he says, "I want to see the way things really are so I can follow you." What a wonderful declaration.

Is that the answer we want to give Jesus? Do we want to see the world, really see it, for all the good and the bad? Let's really think about what this statement means.

To see with the healing power of Jesus is to see the world as **Jesus** sees it. That means we see the *real* world—the world with all the pain and suffering--A world of sin and greed.

Are our eyes open—do we see, do we even *want* to see, or might we still be sitting on the side of the roadway, covered in our cloaks as blind Bartimaeus was?

To see the world as Jesus sees it—to see as Bartimaeus sees with his new eyesight is to see all the beauty, the magnificence of God's creation, but it is also to see the cruelty and ugliness that God's children have produced.

Once our eyes have been opened—if we decided to say, "Yes, we want to see!"—Once we have moved out of those blind spots and received that precious gift of a seeing faith, we can then go where our hearts lead us—

--To the very heart of the Christian faith, which is the gracious, loving heart of Jesus Christ who stretched out his arms so that all the world might be one.

Once *our* eyes have been opened, we can take our church out into the world to serve others as Jesus served.

On this Reformation Sunday, we are called to look carefully at our institution called the church and then determine just how closely we are embodying the compassionate and grace-filled heart of Jesus.

We are called to throw off our cloaks and see the world as Jesus see it.

We are called to remember the past, but more importantly, to focus on the future and to work for the renewal, reform, and transformation which God is calling our church.

This can be hard! We know it's hard! But Jesus calls us to throw off our cloaks and go **out into the world** and this is something most of us don't like to do.

We can't just say, "*I* have decided to follow Jesus," "I have a really great church home here," so let the people come to me... We have been called to go out on a journey—a journey that will last till our final day. The Gospels all present the life of Jesus as a journey. Jesus is always on the move, always moving from here to there.

With a simple, "*Follow me.*" Jesus invites us to walk that journey with him. To look at our lives and our church, to be mindful of the Spirit's moving.

Jesus invites us to leave our cloaks behind, to open our eyes to those blind spots we have been guarding so closely. Jesus invites us to transform—not just change—our minds, our hearts, our church, and our very lives. Amen.