

**The Reverend Mark S. Merrill**

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**Sight For the Journey**

Mark 10:46-52

You know him or, at least, know of him, I'm sure. He used to sit at the same spot each day on the market road. Maybe you were so accustomed to seeing him there that you were oblivious to him. He was Timaeus' son, Bartimaeus. I can't remember how long this blind man had been sitting there – begging for a few coins so he could help out his family. But he's gone now – gone and left his home and his family, gone off to follow that teacher/prophet from Nazareth of all places, that one who healed him – Jesus. But, I guess, I'd be inclined to follow the one who healed me, too.

On his way to Jerusalem for the Passover, Jesus had to go through the city of Jericho. With all the other Passover pilgrims on the road, Jericho was teeming with people. Word had it that Bartimaeus had been waiting for and hoping for a chance to meet Jesus. He had heard of all the other miracles Jesus had performed, including giving sight to other blind people. Maybe his chance would come one day.

Bartimaeus had learned to be aware of almost everything going on around him just by what he heard. On that day Bartimaeus heard that Jesus was going through town. This was his one big and probably last chance for healing. His only hope was upon him. But there were so many people about, how would, even why would, Jesus notice him? He became aware that Jesus was walking right by where he was. Summoning up all his courage and drawing upon all the faith he had, he came to the decision of what he had to do. He began to shout, to yell as loudly as he could, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me." These words rang out, piercing through all the other words and noise. Those around him turned to him to quiet him down. Some probably only wanted to see and hear Jesus, but not have their lives touched and changed by him. They wanted to keep Jesus at a distance; but that could change with this noisy blind beggar making all that fuss. Others thought how rude it was of this blind beggar, this one who sat at the bottom of the social ladder, an outcast who had nothing to offer society, to cry out to this important man and call attention to himself; maybe even preventing Jesus from doing something really important. Others wanted Bartimaeus quiet because the words he used were so dangerous. 'Son of David' was a well-known and obvious title for the Messiah – the Jewish political and religious ruler. Therefore, shouting out these words in an occupied country with Roman soldiers and government spies all about was a dangerous, foolhardy thing to do. So people wanted Bartimaeus quiet. But he would not be so. He could not let his last chance get away from him. So many had heard him cry out the first time, maybe a 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> try would get the attention of Jesus. "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me" he shouted out again. Even more people turned toward him, hoping to find some way of keeping this impudent man from causing even more of a disturbance.

But the strangest thing happened. Jesus stopped. He stopped and said, "Call him." Jesus wanted to see this blind beggar, of all things. Some of those close to Bartimaeus told him that Jesus wanted to see him. His heart soared. His chance, hope, and dream were here at last. Throwing aside his cloak, he jumped up and went reaching, groping, stumbling and staggering toward that one hope, Jesus. Finally he was right before Jesus. He waited for Jesus to do something, to heal him, to restore his sight. But instead of this happening right away, he heard Jesus ask him a question, "What do you want me to do

for you?” Bartimaeus must have thought, ‘Well, isn’t it kind of obvious what I want, just look at me. Anyone could tell that I want to be able to see. How could this teacher and prophet, this miracle worker, this one he had hoped for and waited for, to whom he had cried out in need, how could he ask such a question? But that was what he asked. And Bartimaeus then had to think about what it was that he really wanted. The burden was on him to say what he wanted done. Jesus knew who Bartimaeus was and what he needed. But did he, Bartimaeus, know who he was and what he truly needed? Did he really believe that Jesus, the Son of David, could grant his desire? Bartimaeus thought for a brief moment and then said, “My teacher, let me see again.” In essence he was saying, “Yes, I do believe you are the Son of David, and you are the Christ of God. You are the one who can give me my sight and set me straight again.” Jesus spoke in response and immediately Bartimaeus received his sight. Instead of going his own way, Bartimaeus followed Jesus on the way, the way to Jerusalem and the cross, the grave, and the resurrection.

Bartimaeus’ years of begging, of crying out to so many different people, had given Bartimaeus a boldness, a courage to reach out, and the ability to look out for himself. It also had deepened his faith, that which Jesus said had made him well. It was a tenacious faith that Bartimaeus had, one that would not give up. He had never given up hope as he waited and waited and waited. His day of healing would come. And we see this tenacious faith as he called out to Jesus. He took to the initiative to call out, and he would not be stopped. He would not be quiet for this was his one and only chance to meet with Jesus. And we see that he had a perceptive faith. He did engage in self-examination and determine what was real and what was not, what was a need and what was a desire. Buoyed by his faith, he left all he knew, his town, home, and family, and, with abandon, followed Jesus on the way. We need to think of him as a model in his response to Jesus: he leapt up, got up with anticipation and enthusiasm and left his cloak and his past behind him, for the possibilities, unknown as they were, all that lay ahead as a follower of Jesus.

We can learn so much about ourselves from Bartimaeus, and about who we should be and what we should do from Jesus. Learning these things we will gain sight and insight for our journeys. For most of us, the character we identify with in this story is Bartimaeus. We are often seemingly blind as we stumble along on our life and faith journeys. We are not always sure of who we are, what we should be doing, and how we should be living as Christians. Both our present and our future are uncertain. And we are confronted with so many opportunities that intersect our lives with what it means to follow Jesus. When this happens, we can hear Jesus ask us, “What do you want me to do for you?” We have to engage in self-examination. We have to decide what it is that we need; what we want to be and do with our lives. We have to look at our faith to see if it is tenacious and perceptive.

Ten adults from Westminster did a Work Camp at the Heifer Ranch in Perryville, Arkansas this past week. Work Camps have been and are a way for people to live out what it means for them to follow Jesus. The Ranch is one of 3 learning centers for Heifer International. We helped this organization that from its inception has offered people a way to follow Jesus through its basic mission: to work with communities to end hunger and poverty and to care for the earth.

Heifer International is a nonprofit organization that since 1944 has worked to end hunger and poverty by giving cows, goats, and other food-and-income-producing livestock to impoverished families around the world. Recipients are trained in animal care and environmentally sound agricultural practices so they can lift themselves out of poverty and become self-reliant. Milk, eggs, wool, meat, draft power, and other benefits of animals provide nutrition and money for education, housing, health care,

and small business enterprises. Recipients learn how to care for animals and grow crops in ways that can be sustained for future generations. Heifer provides expertise in animal health, water quality, gender equity, the environment, and community development. Each gift of livestock multiplies as each family that receives a Heifer animal promises to 'pass on the gift' by giving one or more of their animal's offspring to another family in need.

Heifer International currently provides 30 different kinds of food and income-producing livestock, and trees, as well as intensive training in animal husbandry, ecologically-sound, sustainable farming and community development to families in over 600 projects in 51 countries, including the United States. Since it began in 1944, Heifer has helped 7 million families in more than 128 countries and 38 states move toward greater self-reliance through livestock, training, and 'passing on the gift.'

An important part of Heifer's mission is to help people understand the solutions to world hunger. Each year more than 50,000 people visit Heifer's learning centers in California, Massachusetts, and Perryville, Arkansas to participate in seminars, service learning projects and in-depth learning experiences. The centers also demonstrate organic gardening and alternative marketing methods for small farmers. These visitors become familiar with the root causes of poverty and hunger and Heifer's work to help the struggling achieve self-reliance. The Ranch in Perryville has certified organic vegetable gardens, including a Community Supported Agriculture project. It is one of several operations that demonstrate how Heifer projects work around the world (Heifer International on the Web).

The Westminster group worked in the Community Supported Agriculture garden and the kitchen garden helping to get them ready for the winter.

For its more than 60 years of ministering to those in need, volunteers have been and are essential for the work and mission of Heifer. For many of these volunteers the decision to get involved has been the result of their following Jesus as one of his disciples.

They are dedicated to making a difference. They help carry out Heifer's mission by facilitating educational programs, assisting with farm operations, hosting drop-in guests, and filling vital administrative roles. But they also benefit from life changing experiences gained through learning, sharing and growing.

The Ranch actually runs with more volunteers than paid employees.

Among the many volunteers at the Ranch, we interacted a good deal with Lyle and Berta. Presbyterians, they are both retired school teachers from southwest Minnesota. They had to decide what it meant for them to follow Jesus as they moved into their retirement years. What would their faith commitment lead them to do? Their ministry has become being volunteers at the Ranch for two 3-month segments each year. They serve as hosts at the Ranch's visitor center. Through their talks, a video presentation, guided tour, and slide-show they shared with us, as they do with all groups and visitors to the Ranch, the vision, mission and ministry of Heifer International. They have also gone on 2 of the study tours Heifer offers to places where it is at work. They have interacted with recipients of the livestock and have participated in several 'passing on the gift' celebrations.

Like Lyle and Berta, it is up to each one of us, in our life situations, with our gifts, talents, interests, and abilities, to respond to Jesus as he asks us the question, ‘What do you want me to do for you?’ May our faith help us to know what it is we want done as we seek faithfully to follow Jesus – open our eyes; grant us healing and wholeness; help us to know where to change our lives, and then help us change; give us vision, awareness, sensitivity, and love; open our hearts to the truth, to reality, to Christ’s presence and to those in need.