

For several weeks now we have been working our way through the central, pivotal section of Mark's gospel introduced in chapter 8 by the awkward healing of a blind man, who comes to sight only gradually, with much effort from Jesus.

That blind man serves as an overture and a summary snapshot of the disciples, who will learn only awkwardly and gradually who Jesus is and what it means, and how difficult it will be, to follow him--because his road is hard and it leads to the cross.

Along this perilous path there has been for them a lot of frustration and failure.

They have seen a glimpse of glory and made the mistake of reaching for it for themselves.

They have been unable to cast out a demon and to stop someone else who, in Jesus' name, can and does.

They have been chastened almost weekly for failing to understand, for fawning over a rich man and chasing away children, for sidestepping servanthood to grasp for greatness.

They have heard Jesus say three times that he must suffer and die, and they have greeted it both with argument and with damning silence.

They have watched the perfect potential disciple, a wealthy and careful adherent of the law, slink away in sadness because following Jesus was just too costly and difficult; boy the membership committee would love to have that guy back!

It has been a dark and discouraging, bewildering and disillusioning march toward Jerusalem, and the eyes of the disciples are slowly growing clearer upon a reality they do not really want to see.

And now they are in Jericho, seven miles from Jerusalem at the bottom of a dangerous, winding road that is straight uphill...a literal picture of the road they have been walking all along.

At the side of the road sits a blind man.

They do not see him any more than he sees them.

But so unlike the disciples, the man hears Jesus...and he cries out to him, and Jesus hears him.

Jesus asks him the very same question that he asked James and John: *What do you want me to do for you?*

Jesus treats him just like a disciple, which must be why he acts like one.

He names Jesus *Teacher*, and somehow he comes to see, and he follows him on the way.

And the others remember the conversation after the rich young man with the 20-20 vision turned and walked the other way:

*How hard it is for someone with wealth to enter the kingdom of God!*

*Then who can be saved?*

*For God, all things are possible.*

All things--even blind disciples seeing clearly enough to follow Jesus on the uphill way.

Two and a half chapters of frustrations and failure and shattered assumptions climax now in a success story.

A blind beggar is given sight clear enough to follow.

It is possible, after all, to get behind Jesus and to follow him, even uphill to Jerusalem carrying the cross.

It is possible...because *for God, all things are possible.*

I suspect that Martin Luther would find the story of Bartimaeus a perfect choice for the celebration of Reformation, which is far less a one-time historical event than an ongoing project of the Holy Spirit to clear the eyes of the church and help us see clearly enough to follow Jesus in the way of the cross.

It is a recurring story that begins always with the grace and power of God in Jesus.

The story of following Jesus actually and only and always follows Jesus...the story of our following only follows the story of God's grace arriving to us in Jesus.

Luther was so clear and insistent upon this point that he wrote, *I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him...*

*I believe that I cannot believe* -- even the faith we have is a gift, as much as birth and breath and eyesight and everything else we cannot decide or secure for ourselves.

Luther wrote these words at the beginning of his simple explanation to the meaning of the third article of the Apostles' Creed in his small catechism, which by the way is printed in the back of our new hymnals.

In that same paragraph Luther goes on to unpack the gift:

*but instead the Holy Spirit has called me with the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ...*

The story of Bartimaeus is the Church's story, is the Christian's story.

He is called, gathered, enlightened, made holy and kept.

He is given what he needs to stick with Jesus on the long uphill climb of downward mobility.

It was for him as much as it is still is for us impossible to see or to follow.

But not for God; *for God, all things are possible.*

Today at Resurrection, we culminate our October stewardship emphasis calling, gathering, and enlightening us to "Get Behind" -- to get behind Jesus and prioritize our own lives behind the grace of God at work in and beyond our faith community here.

We respond by offering our pledges of effort and money toward the way of Jesus that we share here in this place and time, but let us keep our opened eyes focused and remain very, very clear: our gifts are responses, reactions, returns, secondary movements in a dance we do not lead, our thank you for the gifts and grace of God which has called and enlightened and blessed us and named us holy and empowered us to follow.

We dare not get ahead of God's grace in our earnest efforts to get behind.

All that we have and are is a gift; our little pledges are not so much promissory notes as they are thank-you notes.

God came to your town and heard your cry, and recognized your voice because God is the one who gave it to you.

Somehow, at some time in some way, God showed up in your life, which God gave to you, and called and gathered and enlightened and blessed and inspired you enough to get you to spend a Sunday morning here.

What is your story, what is your song?

When did Jesus arrive at the bottom of the hill and find you, hear you, call you, and give you your heart's desire whether you knew what it really was or not?

What has the Holy Spirit opened your eyes to see?

For what are you thankful?  
When you close your eyes to sing *Amazing Grace*, what is it that now you see?  
What marvelous impossibility has God done for you?

Open your eyes and see it clearly, because the road ahead looks daunting.  
Jesus is calling us to an uphill climb toward the cross, to a downward spiral toward the  
glory of new life.  
Jesus is calling us to the hard and difficult way of service and generosity, a rugged hike that  
means throwing off our cloaks and comforts and embracing that fearful grace of true love  
which our sensibilities most dread and our hearts most desire.  
Listen over the noise of the crowd, listen under the dark closures of your heart, listen and hear  
his voice:

*Will you come and follow me if I but call your name?  
Will you go where you don't know and never be the same?  
Will you leave yourself behind...will you care for cruel and kind...  
Will you set the prisoner free...will you let the blinded see...  
will you climb the cross and risk the loss and fall until you rise....  
will you open up your heart until it opens up your eyes?  
will you open up your life enough to see all that I do?  
and will you do unto others as I have done for you?*

*Take heart; get up, he is calling you.*