

[Mark 10:46-52](#)

A Sermon by [Chuck Currie](#)  
at [Grace United Methodist Church](#)

Sunday, October 26, 2003

Our Gospel reading today can be understood from many different vantage points – and there is undoubtedly a sermon in each.

We find the blind beggar Bartimaeus on the roadside. When he hears that it is Jesus of Nazareth approaching he calls out and asks for healing. Without the gift of sight he can still see that Jesus is the “Son of David,” the messiah.

As a beggar and a man with a disability, Bartimaeus shows enormous courage in speaking up for himself. During this period in history, much like our own time, those in poverty and those hurting are more often than not told to be quiet. This is what happens to Bartimaeus when he speaks out. He is “sternly ordered” to be quiet. So what does he do? He cries out “even more loudly.” “Have mercy on me,” he tells Jesus. “My teacher, let me see again.”

Jesus replies: “Go; your faith has made you well.” Bartimaeus regains his sight.

This is not just a story about the healing powers of Jesus. It is also a story about the power of human faith. Bartimaeus’ faith is so strong that it allows him in the presence of Jesus to step outside of social boundaries. In doing so his faith brings healing through a gift of God. Even in blindness his faith allows him to see what Jesus is and the power he brings.

In this story we learn that in the presence of Jesus it is permissible to step outside of confining boundaries without punishment. In fact, Jesus rewards those who do. We learn that healing is there for those who ask and have faith.

Faith is such an important part of our existence. It is the reason we come to church each Sunday. When we are at our best our faith shapes how we interact with one another and the world at large. In these days of economic concern, terrorism and war, our faith is particularly important. From this story and many others we are reminded that God is with us even in our most difficult moments – even with the social outcasts, the beggars on the roadside.

In opposition to this inclusive image of God there has been a constant temptation throughout Christian history to narrowly define who belongs in the Kingdom of God. Often times that has meant Christianity has been appropriated by the powerful as a means for keeping the social outcasts and powerless in line. In Western culture that tendency has been particularly destructive. One telling

example of this comes from [Melva Wilson Costen's history of African-American Christian worship](#). She recounts a declaration adult slave candidates for baptism were required to say before they were baptized:

You declare in the presence of God and before this congregation that you do not ask for the holy baptism out of any design to free yourself from the Duty and Obedience that you owe your Master while you live, but merely for the good of your soul and to partake of the Graces and Blessings promised to the members of the Church of Jesus Christ.

This is not the only example of narrowing the definition of who belongs in the Kingdom. Over the centuries we have denied all sorts of people the full equality Jesus spoke of when he said in Luke's account of his ministry that God "has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free (Luke 18 NRSV)." We have denied that truth to women, people across the globe from nations poorer than ours, and we still do it today when our church leaders proclaim, "homosexuality is incompatible with Christianity." Wouldn't our studies of Jesus argue that he would object to this tendency of ours to exclude – or even to oppress – in his name?

Another illustration of this bad tendency came this week when it was revealed that an American military leader, Lt. Gen. William Boykin, has been giving speeches in churches across the country claiming that radical Islamists "hated the United States 'because we're a Christian nation, because our foundation and our roots are Judeo-Christian ... and the enemy is a guy named Satan.'"

[The Los Angeles Times](#), which broke the story, reported that in "discussing the battle against a Muslim warlord in Somalia, Boykin told another audience, 'I knew my God was bigger than his. I knew that my God was a real God and his was an idol.'"

He even made comments that "George Bush was not elected by a majority of the voters in the United States," but "was appointed by God." These comments all came to light because the Pentagon just "assigned the task of tracking down and eliminating Osama bin Laden, Saddam Hussein and other high-profile targets" to General Boykin. The President rightfully criticized these remarks, but the General remains in his new position.

[The Rev. Jim Wallis](#), the editor of [Sojourners Magazine](#), responded to these comments with an [open letter](#) to the General in which he said "you utterly confuse the body of Christ with the American nation. The kingdom of God doesn't endorse the principalities and powers of nation-states, armies, and the ideologies of empire; but rather calls them into question."

As technology has made the world smaller and immigration made the United States more diverse new doors have opened up for us to either expand how we view faith in God or how we exclude more people from our definition of the Kingdom of God. General Boykin clearly stands on one side of this debate. I hope we all take another view.

Did you know that Muslims now outnumber Episcopalians in the United States? Or that there are more Muslims than members of the Presbyterian Church USA? Or that there are as many Muslims as Jews in our nation? There is a wonderful verse in the Qur'an that reads: "Do you not know, O people, that I have made you into tribes and nations that you might know each other." Harvard professor and United Methodist [Diana Eck writes in her book \*A New Religious America\*](#) that this "verse is frequently cited by Muslims to make the powerful point that human diversity of race, gender, tribe, and nation is within the providence of God. After all, God could have made one single people, but as the Qur'an puts it, God made many nations and tribes, not that we may be divided but that we may know one another."

Learning about how people of different faiths relate to God is going to become increasingly important for the American Christian community. While America has never been a Christian nation in our form of government, the Christian faith has largely shaped our ways of thinking. Already this has changed as Muslim, Hindus, Buddhists and others have integrated into our society. And Christian immigrants from places like Central America and India have incorporated elements from their own cultures into Christian worship here in their new home, which is already impacting our own faith tradition. This process can be helpful to us in determining how we relate to God. It can be liberating.

When I was in India this summer we visited a number of churches. Unfortunately, similar to our own experiences with slavery, Christianity was historically used to undermine the local culture as the British attempted to "civilize" the native peoples. One Christian missionary wrote in 1875 that "The government of India can not but acknowledge the great obligation under which it is laid by the benevolent exertions made by the five hundred missionaries, whose blameless life, example, and self-denying labors are infusing new vigor into the stereotyped life of the great populace placed under English rule, and are preparing them to be in every way better men and better citizens of the great empire in which they dwell."

One of the churches we visited had been established by the Anglican Church and still followed all the traditions. This was a very Western church where Indian people worshiped. Not only did they follow the traditions, but they even took off their Indian clothing and the men wore Western business suits while the women wore Sunday dresses and high heels, and even carried purses. There were few acknowledgements of the local culture and customs. We could have been in London or even St. Louis.

Another service we attended, held at [Tamilnadu Theological Seminary](#), was quite different. There they incorporated Tamil customs. There was Tamil music. There was Indian incense burning. Unlike the first church I mentioned the service was not in English, but Tamil, which more people could understand. All the elements of the service pointed to an image of Christ as the liberator of the oppressed. The students studying there were mostly Dalits, the poorest of the poor. Yet in this most un-Western service I think we saw the most authentic expression of Christian faith. But to see that we were challenged to look beyond our own culture and understandings of God. What was happening there was what happened in African-American culture. These Christians saw through a theology of oppression and through their experience and powers of reason developed a contextual theology of liberation. Our world will be stronger for it.

I want to return now to the story of Bartimaeus.

Biblical scholar [Marcus Borg in his book Reading the Bible Again for the First Time](#) gives us different examples of how we might interpret the narratives in the Bible. He pays special attention to our reading this morning and links it with the earlier story in Mark of Jesus restoring sight to Bethsaida. Both stories are of a type that “combines both history and metaphor.” Borg writes, “I think there are good historical grounds for saying that Jesus really did restore sight to some blind people.” He goes on to say:

By placing these stories where he does, the author of Mark gives them a metaphorical meaning, even as one or both of them may reflect history remembered. Namely, gaining one’s sight seeing again is the way of Jesus. That way, that path, involves journeying with him from Galilee to Jerusalem, the place of death and resurrection, of endings and beginnings. To see that is to have one’s eyes opened.

How is our sight? Are we seeing everything that needs to be seen? Do we see now that oppression in the name of Jesus is wrong? Do we see that the diversity of peaceful religions is a gift of God so that “we might know one another”? Blindness is not just a physical ailment. It is also a state of mind. And as hard as we try there will always be times were we cannot see what needs to be seen. So we pray to God and say: Have mercy on us. Teacher, let us see again. This we pray to the God who created many tribes and nations that we might know each other. If we do this, the Kingdom will conclude to expand and the word of God will be heard by all of creation. Amen.