



## *Round Hill Community Church*

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**Sermon: October 25, 2009**

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**Our Heart's Truest Desire, Robert B. Culp**

Psalm 38:1-8, 19-22; Mark 10:46-52

In 1984, numerous awards and accolades went to *The Killing Fields*, which is a film that tells a small part of the tragic story of the death and violence that took place in Cambodia in the late 1970's. Following the defeat of the oppressive political regime of Pol Pot, western doctors poured into the country in an effort to help heal the carnage and bind up profound and countless wounds.

Interestingly, the doctors came upon a number of women who were blind. Upon closer examination, though, the doctors found that the retinas in the eyes of the women were in good shape, and their optic nerves were healthy. Gradually, it dawned on the doctors that these women were psychologically blinded, having chosen not to see any more. For they had already seen too much – their husbands and children slaughtered, their villages pillaged and burned, their entire lives turned upside down, gutted, and destroyed. For these survivors, blindness had become a spiritual condition, rather than a physical one. In order to cope and survive, these women had literally shut out the ugliness of the world all around them, and they had chosen to see no more.

Mark's lesson this morning has to do with both physical blindness, as well as spiritual blindness. There are only two stories in all Mark's Gospel that focus on the restoration of sight, and those two healing passages form a kind of bookend around Mark's challenging discussion of discipleship, found in chapters eight through ten. Through those healing stories, Mark is asking us: What does it mean to see Jesus? What does it mean to follow Jesus? What does it mean for us to clear away the fog of our complicated and confused lives so that we can focus upon who and what and where we are called to be as Jesus' disciples?

In both healing stories, it's very clear that the disciples who are eating and sleeping, walking and traveling, arguing and laughing with Jesus don't have a clue as to what Jesus is talking about. Somehow, these followers of Jesus remain blind to the possibilities of God. And ironically, but not too surprisingly, it is the outsiders – the beggars, the sick, the marginalized and

outcasts (whether in a burst of faith or hope or vision) who are the ones who become wondrously healed. These outsiders are the ones who are given to see again, and who are able to respond to God's invitation to become restored and whole.

In a very real way, our Gospel lesson today is about making the kingdom of God visible in a world that is spiritually blind – making God visible in the midst of our own spiritual blindness and myopic living.

The story of Bartimaeus teaches us that the healing of our blindness and the restoration of our sight is as much our responsibility as it is a gift from God. Here this beggar is, sitting by the side of the road. He's all alone, dusty and distressed, and all wrapped up in his familiar ragged cloak. He's smart enough to know that if he sits close by the main roadway, all those religious pilgrims and priests rushing toward Jerusalem for Passover observances will notice him. He's bright enough to know that if he makes himself obvious enough and pitiful enough, he will collect enough alms to keep him safe and fed for a while.

But then, he becomes aware of a commotion, and he hears some of the travelers crying out the name of Jesus who is coming near. Immediately, he feels some measure of excitement building in his body, for he has heard the stories about this rabbi, this amazing healer. And his inner eye, which is so finely tuned to view with his heart what his eyes cannot see ... his inner eye catches a vision of the possibility of his becoming whole. Thus, with an eager joy and his desperate need, with his passionate hope and faith, he jumps up. He runs in the direction of Jesus, he hears Jesus' question as to what he really wants, and he gives a voice to his heart's truest desire. Amazingly, Bartimaeus is healed.

One of the lessons here is that healing begins with honesty. Healing begins with knowing who we are and who we are not, by admitting our imperfections and our brokenness, and by confessing to ourselves and to God what we really need in order to be whole. Rabbi Harold Kushner suggests that the original sin of the human condition is our illusion of being self-sufficient – our arrogant assumption that we can do it all ourselves, that we can become everything we want to be ourselves, that we can overcome it all ourselves ... based simply on our self-centered beliefs about own strength, cleverness, and power. But Bartimaeus teaches us that we need God and others for wholeness to be ours. Indeed, we need a power, a Spirit beyond ourselves, to feel and to know and to see all of life.

I think that the most important thing Jesus does in our story today is to ask Bartimaeus, "What do you want? What do you want me to do for you? What is your heart's truest desire?"

You see, all the divine power in the world can't possibly change us if we are not ready, if we are not convinced, that we want to be healed ...that is, if we are not able to admit or to express our deepest needs and desires. Now it may seem fairly obvious that what Bartimaeus needs and wants is to be able to see. But it really isn't quite that simple. Because when Bartimaeus says what he wants, he is also acknowledging the difference that his new-found sight will

bring. Indeed, when we are healed from our own blindness, the demands and change that our new vision creates can be overwhelming. In short, our story today tells us to be careful about what we want, because we might get it – and life will never be the same.

Will Campbell, a wise and earthy Baptist preacher, tells a story about his own awakening vision as a follower of Jesus. When he was a teenager growing up in rural Mississippi, he witnessed a classic redneck lynching. A black man was caught stealing at the mayor's house. And the vigilante white citizens in that community reacted with gleeful rage – hanging him, dragging his body behind the back of a car along a gravel road, shouting hate-filled epithets, and throwing rocks at the body. Campbell remembers going with the other teenagers in town to the cemetery where the body was dragged, to mock that broken body and to spit insults at the victim.

It was only years later, when Campbell caught the vision of God's kingdom, when he understood for the first time the justice and compassion and dignity that God intends for all God's children, it was only then that Campbell was able to look back on that terrible day in Mississippi, and with the new eyes of faith to see the brutality and sinful horror of what he and others had done to another child of God. You see, when we ask for new sight, we better be prepared for changing our vision, for letting go of the prejudices and the fears and the myths that have narrowed our living for too long.

Which suggests another lesson Bartimaeus has to teach us: namely, that being healed involves accepting personal and transforming risk. I've always been struck by the image of that blind beggar throwing off his cloak and springing forward, casting off everything that represented his poverty and his security in the past. That cloak had defined his life. It had been his bed at night, his protection from the rain and cold, his covering that shielded his impoverished self from the ridicule and scorn of the crowds. For him to throw off his cloak was to throw off everything that he had held on to and kept him safe. It was to throw off his old life in order to be free and unencumbered for whatever new life was awaiting him. It was to become vulnerable, in order that God could make him whole.

And it is the same with us, too. For us to throw off our own cloaks of convention and protection is to make the ultimate statement of faith. It is to give up the old, and to trust that God will cloak us with a new and abundant future. To throw off our own security blankets is to replace the power of predictability with the power of possibility. And it's only then that we can really see. Bartimaeus teaches us that really to see means to recognize God – the God before us, the God beside us, the God inside of us – who calls us to a journey toward wholeness. To see means to be finally free – free like Bartimaeus, free to follow, and to follow where God leads us, maybe even to sacrifice and suffer for what really matters.

Clarence Jordan, the founder of Koinonia Farm, the interracial commune outside Americus, Georgia, grew up in a very prosperous family. He received a traditional theological educa-

tion, earning a Ph.D. in Greek New Testament, and he was known for his brilliance as a writer, having hopes of becoming a professor.

Instead, in response to a holy disturbance he felt inside, he left seminary to establish an interracial community in segregated Georgia in the mid-1950s. Opposition was not unexpected, but it was led by his own people, the Southern Baptist congregation that eventually excommunicated the whole Koinonia community. The charges leveled against them read this way: “Said members have persisted in holding services where both white and colored attend together.”

The excommunication was followed by vandalism, cross-burning, legal pressures, beatings, bombings, a comprehensive economic boycott, and shootings by snipers who aimed at any available target on the commune. Clarence turned to his brother, attorney Robert Jordan, for legal counsel. He asked him to become a legal representative of the Koinonia community. Robert, who later served as a Georgia State Senator and a justice of the Georgia State Supreme Court, declined.

“Clarence, I can’t do that. You know my political aspirations. Why if I represented you, I might lose my job, my house, everything I’ve got.” “We might lose everything too, Bob.” “It’s different for you, Clarence.”

“Why is it different, Bob? I remember, it seems to me, that you and I joined the church the same Sunday as boys. I expect when we came forward, the preacher asked me about the same question he did you. He asked me, ‘Do you accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior?’ And I said, ‘Yes.’ What did you say?”

“I follow Jesus, Clarence, up to a point.”

“Could that point, by any chance, be – the cross?”

“That’s right. I follow him up to the point of the cross, but not on the cross. I’m not about to get myself crucified.”

“Then, Bob, I don’t believe you’re a disciple. You are an admirer of Jesus, but not a disciple of his. I think you ought to go back to the church you belong to, and tell them you are an admirer of Jesus, but not a disciple.”

“Well now, if everyone who felt like I do did that, we wouldn’t have a church, would we?”

“The question,” Clarence observed, “is do you have a church?”

Gregory of Nyssa, a fourth-century Christian bishop, preached that the basic human sin is the refusal to grow – the decision to remain miserable but safe, the decision to hide in our familiar cloaks of blindness, the decision to avoid any clear vision of who we want to become. In our own places of need, Jesus comes to us where we are, and he asks us to grow. He puts the question directly to us, “What is your heart’s truest desire? What do you want?”

And then he invites us to jump up with childlike enthusiasm and joy, to throw off whatever cloaks may burden us or hold us down, and to stumble forward in risk, in hope, not knowing what the future may hold, – which is what faith is all about. He invites us to speak our need, honestly and humbly, and then to trust in the power and possibility of God’s grace to meet that need, to heal us and to make us whole. In the face of our heart’s truest desire, that is the good news of the Gospel.