

“The Essence of Our Faith”

Mark 10:46-52

Preached by Dr. Robert F. Browning, Pastor
Smoke Rise Baptist Church
Stone Mountain, Georgia
October 25, 2009

Harold Campbell was one of the finest members of our church. He died on Christmas day last year. He had a pleasant personality and generous spirit. He was loved by everyone in his Sunday school class and Prime Time.

It will soon be five years since Harold and his brother, Herman, had an accident on their way home from Prime Time. Few people thought Harold would survive the wreck that night, but he did. However, his life was dramatically changed because he lost his eyesight. Even though Harold handled his blindness as well as anyone could, his friends and family grieved over the changes and disappointments he had to manage. Rarely did I visit Harold that he did not ask me to pray that his sight would be restored. He wanted to see again. So did Bartimaeus.

Jesus and his disciples were on their way to Jerusalem to observe Passover. It was customary for crowds to gather around pilgrims as they made their journey, especially if someone in the group was teaching. Caravans became mobile classrooms and even those unable to go to Jerusalem would walk a few miles with those that would complete the journey. Since Jesus had a reputation as a good teacher that courageously challenged the religious authorities, many walked with him and listened carefully to what he said.

Bartimaeus was sitting by the roadside where Jesus' caravan passed. When he heard that Jesus was near, he began to shout, “Son of David! Jesus! Have pity on me!” He repeated the cry for help even though many around him tried to silence him.

Upon hearing Bartimaeus, Jesus came to a complete stop. “Call him here,” he said. The beggar wasted no time, throwing off his cloak so he could run. “What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus asked him. “Master teacher, my prayer is that I might see again,” the beggar said. Jesus replied, “Go! Your faith has cured you.” Immediately he was healed and followed Jesus with everyone else.

Why do you think Bartimaeus made a scene the day that Jesus passed by and cried out so loudly? I believe this was an indication of how desperate he was and how much confidence he had in Jesus. In Mark's gospel, Bartimaeus was the first to address Jesus as the expected Messiah of the Davidic line. Isn't it interesting that a blind beggar could see what others could not. Adversity is a good teacher, isn't it?

Have you ever been shunned, ignored, overlooked and given the impression you were worthless? Has anything ever happened to you that can help you identify with Bartimaeus? In that culture, as well as ours, beggars were nobodies. The only time someone spoke to them was to remind them of their insignificance.

Do you know what rejection does to a person and how devastating it is to their self-esteem? Do you know how it makes a person feel to realize that no one hears their cry for help? Have you ever felt that lonely and that level of despair? If you have, surely you are committed to preventing it from happening to anyone around you.

Why do you think the people around Bartimaeus rebuked him and tried to silence him? He was a nuisance. They could not hear Jesus as he talked along his journey for all the commotion Bartimaeus was making. Besides, they were convinced that Jesus would have no time for Bartimaeus. He was too important and busy.

Why do you think Jesus stopped and called for Bartimaeus? How could the man that told the parable of the Good Samaritan do differently?

Do you recall the words he read in the synagogue in Nazareth as he began his public ministry? “The Spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and **recovery of sight for the blind**, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat

down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened upon him and he began by saying to them, 'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing' " Luke 4:18-21. How could the person that spoke those words not stop to help Bartimaeus? Hearing the pleas for help that others ignored was the essence of his faith.

Why do you think Jesus healed Bartimaeus? After all, he refused to grant James and John's request in the previous passage when he asked them the same question he asked Bartimaeus. "What do you want me to do for you?"

It appears to me that Jesus was not interested in granting requests for positions of honor and privilege. He was, however, more than eager to help people see those things that would make life better for them and all those around them.

The placement of this story in Mark's gospel is strategic. It comes at the end of a block of material in Mark that begins and ends with Jesus healing two blind men (Mark 8:22-10:52). This is not coincidental, but symbolic of the disciples' inability to discern Jesus' mission and purpose. The dialogue between Jesus and his disciples while on their way from Galilee to Jerusalem reveals this.

Three times on this journey Jesus told the disciples that he would be rejected by the religious authorities, suffer and die. It appears this warning went over their heads. When he told them that he came to serve others, not to be served, they responded by asking for positions of honor and prestige. When he reminded them that in God's kingdom the first would be last and the last first, they asked to be placed at the front of the line. Is there any doubt the disciples were spiritually blind? I don't think so.

This is reinforced by the last healing miracle recorded in Mark. Today's text is Mark's final attempt to expose the disciples' poor eyesight and open the eyes of his readers. It is a story that serves as a call to discipleship, theirs and ours.

What does it mean to be a follower of Jesus? We'll do everything in our power to make sure that no one is left behind. In God's kingdom, community embraces everyone.

We have grown accustomed to hearing the education slogan, "No child left behind." Spiritually this needs to be expanded to, "No person left behind." I don't think there is a clearer message in Mark's gospel.

Repeatedly, Mark told his readers about Jesus reaching out to those that society ignored, the Gerasene demoniac, the Syrophenician woman, the blind man at Bethsaida and even little children. Bartimaeus was another example of Jesus' inclusiveness and should serve as a reminder to us to leave no person behind.

This story clearly reminds us that it is the responsibility of believers to respond to those in need, not try to hide them. Like Jesus, hearing pleas for help that others try to silence is the essence of our faith. Rather than being annoyed by those that cry out for help, we should be upset by the actions of those that silence them. It is the responsibility of the church to be the voice for the voiceless and an advocate for the powerless.

Look carefully at 10:49. The word "call" is used three times. "Jesus stopped and said, '**Call** him.' So they **called** to the blind man, 'Cheer up! On your feet! He's **calling** you.' "

Surely you see the significance of Mark using this word three times. It is the duty of the church to call outsiders to the forefront and make their needs known. If we don't do it, who will? I fear no one will.

A few years ago I attended the Celebration of Pentecost service hosted by the Regional Council of Churches of Atlanta. It was held at the beautiful Peachtree Christian Church downtown. The guest preacher was Dr. James A. Forbes, Jr., who at that time was the senior minister of The Riverside Church in New York City. Newsweek magazine named him one of the most effective preachers in the English speaking world. After hearing him, I agree.

One of the things he said that day that penetrated my heart was this. "We must get out of our cul-de-sacs of religiosity and join others on the road of life. We must listen for the cries of those that are hurting and go help them."

Then he asked us, "Do you hear the cries of that mother who put her child to bed hungry? What about the father that has no health insurance that is having chest pains? What about the child that is an orphan because his parents died of AIDS? What about the family that is heating their home with a

dangerous kerosene heater because their electricity was cut off? What about the couple paying exorbitant interest rates on a loan to repair their car? Do you hear these people crying from where you are?" I am ashamed to say that most of us don't.

Furthermore, building this inclusive community will be accomplished one person at a time. Notice how specific Jesus was after he heard this man cry out for help. "Jesus stopped and said, 'Call him.' " When the man arrived, Jesus asked, "What do you want me to do for you?"

I am convinced that the way we are going to make the world better is one person at a time. I wish it could be done on a larger scale more quickly, but it won't be. Don't ever think that what you do to help one person is unimportant. It is God's design for changing the world.

I know you have heard the story about the man that was throwing starfish that had been swept on the shore back into the ocean. When he told someone what he was doing, they asked him what difference it was going to make since there were so many starfish on the beach. The wise man lifted the starfish in his hand and said, "It will make a big difference to this one!"

Transferring what I have said today from the head to the heart is the hard part. Hearing and responding to the cries of those that others try to silence requires a strong level of commitment to be the presence of Christ in a blind and deaf world. Bringing their plight to the world's attention will take precious time and resources. I am convinced we cannot do it without God's help. We are far too distracted and self-centered.

It will require an answer similar to Bartimaeus' when Jesus asks us, "What do you want me to do for you?" Few questions expose our true nature and priorities.

I'm trying to reply by asking Jesus to open my eyes so that I might see more clearly his mission in the world and my role in it. I say that I am trying because a lot of other things cloud my vision and redirect my focus. Only with God's help can I look beyond them to what is really important.

"Open My Eyes, That I May See"

Open my eyes that I may see, glimpses of truth thou hast for me
Place in my hands the wonderful key that shall unclasp and set me free.
Silently now I wait for Thee, ready my God thy will to see
Open my eyes illumine me, Spirit divine!