

“A Problem With Your Vision” 2015
Psalm 143:1-8 Mark 10:46-52

When I served a church in North Carolina,
I moderated our Presbytery’s Church Development Division,
and one of the responsibilities of that committee
was to decide and distribute Presbytery funds
to congregations asking for financial help.

One evening I had a meeting with the Session of a small
African-American congregation that had been organized
during Reconstruction, just after the Civil War.
But now the church had fallen on hard times,
and clearly had been in decline for some time.

The building was a 100-year old chapel in sad disrepair,
with the paint peeling, vandalism and general neglect,
and most at the meeting were quite old and feeble.

They talked about their past and how much they loved their church,
that had once been an influential center of their community,
and how difficult, discouraging & desperate things were.
They were in a rough, neglected and dangerous neighborhood
with few prospects of attracting young families or new members ...

... and almost in tears one the elders finally said,
“We just want to survive for a few more years.”

It was a poignant and sad moment,
their despair, defeat and hopelessness hung like a cloud ...
... and in one of those rare moments of inspiration,
... I said to them,
“But I don’t think God wants you to survive.”

An immediate stunned and tense silence filled the room,
as some very angry faces stared back at me in shocked disbelief...
... trying to figure out if I was a racist or an insensitive jerk.

I waited and allowed for the tension before I continued,
saying, “I don’t know of anywhere in Scripture
where it talks about mere survival or just getting by...
... but there’s lots of places where God turns things around.”

God calls and equips his people to thrive in faithfulness and joy,
but never to just barely survive...
... and if survival is the best we can manage,
then I really don’t see the point.

**** Our God doesn’t do maintenance – Ours is a God of abundance.**

Then I continued, and explained to the distraught elders,
"Surely God has way more in mind for you than just survival.
Surely in the city of Wilmington there ought to be

a vibrant African-American Presbyterian church.

And I don't think your real problem is an
aging congregation unable to attract younger new members,
a lack of money & resources, or even inadequate facilities.

**It's a vision problem, of failing to see expectantly by faith.
It's withered hope, and simply not dreaming large enough dreams.**

* Then I suggested that
instead of looking for ways to cut back and trim expenses,
let's focus on finding more ways that you can
connect and make a difference in your community.

**It was God who intentionally placed you exactly where you are,
and has entrusted your church with a significant opportunity
to be a bright light shining in a dark & discouraging place.
Right here you can honor the Lord and help build up his Kingdom.**

Then I suggested a well-funded plan for their consideration
in which our Division of the Presbytery would help them find,
and we'd support financially a gifted pastor to lead them
to fulfill a more hopeful vision, mission and dream.

There was a shift as I described how the funding plan would work,
the rise in noise & excitement among the elders was incredible.

* **It was truly a God-moment of blessing and exuberant grace**
as everybody was talking excitedly all at once
sharing wild ideas about what their church could do
and new ways to serve and make a real difference...
... and over the next few years I saw it beginning to work!

Just this past week, I checked out their website again,
and clearly they are a congregation on fire for the Lord.
They are not just surviving, far from it ---
for they are a wonderfully vibrant and thriving church
actively involved in some remarkable projects and
making a significant difference in their community.

It is obvious that their vision has improved
as their dreams and hopes have continued to grow and reach out.

The story we read earlier in Mark is also about a vision problem.
Bartimeaus is blind
and reduced to begging along the road into Jericho.

But there is way more going on in this story
than just an event that happened once long ago.

This passage begins
with Jesus, his disciples and a crowd leaving Jericho.
Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem
where the next event will be his triumphant entry on a colt
leading to all that will happen during Holy Week.

The name of the man who was blind and begging was Bartimeaus.

In Aramaic, "bar" means son,
and "timeaus" means one who is honored or valued...

... **Bartimeaus, a valued and treasured son.**

But something in his life had gone awry,
as he struggles and begs for enough alms to survive.

Continuing, vs. 47-48

When he (Bartimeaus) heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say,
"Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out
even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Someone, unnamed in the text has told Bartimeaus about Jesus,
and telling about Jesus is something we call, "evangelism".
Bartimeaus has heard and wants what Jesus can do for him.
Someone unnamed has been faithful, so he calls out to Jesus.

Bartimeaus cried out referring to Jesus as the "Son of David"
which is a theological title from the Old Testament prophets
that refers to the long-promised Messiah of Israel.
Clearly this blind man
can see something about Jesus that the others do not.

The title, "Son of David" also serves as a bridge
that connects the crowds shouting and waving palm branches
as Jesus entered Jerusalem on a colt
which the scribes and Pharisees tried to silence,
with the crowd trying to silence Bartimeaus
from shouting, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

This story challenges me to I consider how I would react
if during a worship service here someone started screaming,
"Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

In contrast, Jesus noticed and cared about Bartimeaus.
Jesus valued him and wanted to hear what the man everyone else considered a
useless bother and nuisance had to say.

The Lord notices and responds to Bartimeaus, vs. 49

Jesus stood still and said, "Call him here." And they called the blind man, saying to him,
"Take heart; get up, he is calling you."

Those words spoken by the crowd, "Take heart; get up, he is calling you",
aren't those the words of invitation we are called to proclaim?

Earlier in this same chapter of Mark,
a wealthy young man came to Jesus asking about eternal life,
and Jesus told him to sell his stuff,
to give away his wealth to the poor and follow him.
But he the young man wanted his toys more than he wanted Jesus...
... and I've always hoped that eventually he came to his senses.

In contrast how does Bartimeaus respond?, vs. 50
So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus.

It is a significant detail that he threw off his cloak,
probably his only possession, security and place to sleep.

This infers his eager enthusiasm and commitment,
and trusting faith that Jesus had something better for him,
in throwing off any encumbrance against rushing to Jesus.

Perhaps we too may need to deal with obstacles or stuff in the way
that interferes with having an authentic walk with our Lord,
anything we place above faithful & obedient discipleship
or that keeps us from proclaiming the Good News of Christ.

In the text last week, James and John came to Jesus with a request
and Jesus asked them, "What do you want me to do for you?"
They wanted to gain honor and position,
by asking to be at the right and left hand of Jesus in glory.

Notice the difference when Bart is asked the same question 51-52
Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" The blind man said to him, "My
teacher, let me see again."
Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." Immediately he regained his sight and
followed him on the way.

What do I want? I want to be healed, my life restored.
I want to live out the blessings of my Creator.

**And when Bartimeaus receives his eyesight,
he also receives insight and so he chooses to follow Jesus.**

In contrast to the crowd and the disciples, or the rich man,
Bartimeaus, who is blind, sees with eyes of hope who Jesus is,
by faith he leaves all behind, is healed, and follows him.
It's more than a miracle story, this is a call and response story.

* It's important to recognize that this text is not saying,
that because you had **enough** faith, your faith made you well,
but, by turning to me in faith, **by grace** you were healed.
The power of God set you free, it was not **your** good works or deeds.

By faith we are called to renewed hope, commitment and trust,
in knowing that surely God is with us to enlarge and fulfill
our Spirit-given mission, our visions and our dreams.

Our call is to look beyond and through
the problems of our present situation or circumstance,
and to trust and hope in the wonderful and mysterious
continuing work, healing and blessings of God.

In a few weeks
we'll be making our financial pledges for the coming year.
The Lord will most surely accomplish whatever He intends,
and Jesus will continue to love us, regardless of what we do.

The question is,
will we participate, will we support the work of the Lord? ...
... for depending on our level of support, the dollars we pledge,
**our elders will try to balance the ministries of this church
with the resources they believe will be available to us.**

It's a question not of scarce resources, but of vision and trust,
of choosing to see or failing to see expectantly by faith,
with courage of hope by choosing to dream a larger dream.
We all know this world's power to discourage and to disillusion,
but truly Jesus Christ is with us, among us, and for us;
and his question still hovers all around us,
"What do you want me to do for you?"

**It's about vision, or failing to see expectantly by faith,
or withered hope, and simply not dreaming large enough dreams.**

**I have always believed we need to keep dreaming bigger dreams,
for this is an incredible church, so many gifts and blessings,**

**and I'm convinced there is nothing God cannot accomplish in us,
there is no problem too big for us to tackle and resolve,
for there's plenty of potential, so much that we can do...
... for truly God is up to something amazing these days here at FPC.**

I am asking for your faithfulness in earnest prayer,
that each of us will pray each day for our church and mission,
that we will serve and follow in faith wherever God guides
and consider prayerfully the generosity of your stewardship...

**... and mostly by listening, trusting and responding to the Lord,
let us be dreaming much bigger and far grander dreams.**