Bartimaeus, Thirty Years Later

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Being on the road is grueling. And recently it has been the most taxing I can remember: the endless stream of people, the wall to wall scheduling, the intense meetings and late night conversations. Each leg of the journey hurts physically, and I can feel myself wearing down, trying just to get my body from one place to the next. It becomes more difficult each time to muster up the energy to do the work as if I weren't tired. This accumulated weariness reminds me of why we decided it was time to take next year off the road to write. I've hit a physical and emotional wall.

But always, in the midst of the grind, there is something that happens that reminds me why I do this work, some little encounter that brings relief and renewal. And it's usually unexpected, serendipitous. Spirit intervention.

The last day of this most recent trip to Oregon seemed to be more weight than I could lift. I was scheduled to preach at Jacque French's church near Portland, then to talk to a study group that Dale Stitt was facilitating on *The Biblical Vision of Sabbath Economics*. I am committed to trying to accommodate requests from our BCIC members, and these two friends have helped BCM alot. But I couldn't imagine how I'd get through the day, coming immediately off of a conference with Mennonites in Albany in which Elaine and I had given three keynotes and four workshops in 48 hours. We were both running on empty.

But two things happened. First, the gospel lectionary text for the service was Mk 10:46-52—the story of Bartimaeus. I realized early Sunday morning (the only time I had to prepare the sermon) that it had been exactly 30 years since our intentional community in Berkeley, CA had adopted the name of the blind beggar—a name our Cooperative now also bears. So I determined I would share very personally about how important the Bartimaeus story has been to my journey—something I don't do easily as a high introvert, and even though this congregation was not familiar. Sometimes on the road you just have to work from your soul as a way of self-care.

Moreover, I was mindful that we were on the cusp of the great feast of remembering our ancestors that begins with "All Hallows Ev'en" and ends with the "Day of the Dead." In ancient Celtic tradition this was a season of turning from the brightness of summer to the darkness of winter, and it brought a "thinning" of the veil between the living and those who had passed through the ultimate turning from life to death (you might remember my comments on this last year in the October E-news). So I was feeling the cloud of witnesses lingering especially close.

The second thing that happened just as the service at Southminster Presbyterian church was beginning was that two former members of our Berkeley community walked in: Pam Kerr, who now does social work and family therapy in Salem, OR; and Amber Baker, who now teaches inner city Portland kids organic farming and marketing. Amber was born in our community, and when I saw her walk in, I couldn't hold back the tears. Here, amidst this congregation of strangers, we were going to have an anniversary reunion and tell our story, thirty years later *(below, Rembrandt, "Jesus heals the blind man," 1655).*



I won't share my exegetical comments on the Bartimaeus text here, since they were based on the piece that has long been posted on our website. I summarized how Mark's masterful narrative suggests to us that ultimately, our comprehension of Jesus' call to discipleship is *not* a mater of cognitive assent, nor of churchly habit, nor of liturgical magic, nor of theological sophistication or doctrinal correctness, nor of religious piety, nor any of the other poor substitutes that we Christians have conjured through the ages. Discipleship is at its core a matter of whether or not we really want to *see*. To see our weary world as it truly is—without denial and delusion: the tough reality of inconvenient truths about economic disparity and racial oppression and ecological destruction and war without end. And to see our beautiful world as it truly could be, free of despair or distraction: the divine dream of enough for all and beloved community and restored creation and the peaceable kingdom. Discipleship is about seeing life in its deepest trauma and its greatest ecstasy—to live into God's vision of things.

Then I talked about our little experiment in intentional community living and radical discipleship. This was, after all, the place I was midwifed into my life's work. It was, in retrospect, a wisdom beyond our years that led us to embrace the name of this obscure biblical character. Somehow we knew that we were part of an old, wise story which, as Quakers say, "speaks to our condition." We understood that our relative privilege and affluence as First World Christians cannot mask our spiritual poverty. It was a goofy name for a community; no one could spell it, and we were constantly getting mail to Barnabas, or Bartholemew, and even once to "Bottom-Ass." Nevertheless, we, like Bartimaeus, desired to shed our blindness in order to embrace the journey of discipleship.

For ten years we did extraordinary ministry in the name of the poor man. Up to 25 adults and children lived in four households in a working class African American neighborhood. We practiced intensive urban gardening and animal husbandry; maintained a wider local worshipping congregation of some 60 persons; participated

in resistance to the arms race and the early Sanctuary movement; and educated on radical discipleship and church renewal. And we had some *great* Halloween parties.

Our community disbanded after a remarkable run, and the clan scattered. But most have continued to follow the Way. So I asked Pam and Amber to stand up, and looking at them, reminded us all that our feeble attempts to live this story had bonded us permanently. Then, with tears welling up, I acknowledged that there have been a few from our community who had passed on into the cloud of witnesses in the intervening years—including Amber's father. At that moment it felt like the veil was extraordinarily thin, as I called on these saints to join us in this holy moment of remembering. The sanctuary grew very, very quiet…

Later that afternoon, when my responsibilities were completed, Elaine, Pam, Amber and her partner Jason and I squeezed in a wonderful celebration at the local pub before we had to get back on the plane. "There is a part of myself," said Amber, "that only surfaces when I am with Bartimaeus people. And I've never found anything like it." This reminded me of a conversation over dinner Elaine and I had with her perhaps eight years ago, when she was a teenager on a summer sojourn with the Los Angeles Catholic Worker. I was impressed then with her deep grasp of important things, and asked her where she thought her convictions had come from. "The *community*, of course" she retorted with some exasperation. "But Amber," I said, "you were what, only 5 or 6 years old when our community disbanded!?" She put down her fork and looked me in the eye with great seriousness. "I remember *everything*."



This Monday morning, safely home in Oak View after a long return trip last night, and before getting ready to leave again early Wednesday morning, I took some time to reflect on the remarkable gift of yesterday. In the midst of an exhausting trip came this unscripted oasis of Spirit, this moment far away from home to celebrate three decades of trying to live into the Bartimaeus story, and of never growing out of its wisdom and power. The great Baptist radical Clarence Jordan (*below*) of Koinonia Farms defined faith as betting your life on unseen realities. I have bet my life on Bartimaeus; it's my story and I'm stickin' to it, as the name of our Cooperative today attests.

We live in a time of relentless seduction and distraction by a thousand stupid stories of celebrities or politicians or sports heroes that entertain us to death. So on this 30th anniversary of my embrace of the story of Bartimaeus, I pray that I might never become confused by, nor forget it—for truly, as Leslie Silko puts it, this sacred story protects me from cultural illness, and no evil can stand up to it.