

***A sermon preached on October 24<sup>th</sup>, 2021 based upon Mark 10:46 – 52 entitled, “Rescued from the Realm of the Unseen.”***

As Jesus nears the end of his journey to Jerusalem, we hear the story of a remarkable encounter he had with a blind beggar.

*Listen for the word of the Lord as it comes to us from the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of Mark’s Gospel beginning in the 46<sup>th</sup> verse.*

**They came to Jericho. As Jesus and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"**

*“Son of David” is a term for the messiah. This is essentially the first time in the Gospel that someone seems to recognize, or at least put into words, the truth that Jesus is the messiah, and it is all the more striking that it is a blind beggar who does so.*

**Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"**

**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."**

**So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus.**

*Notice: Bartimaeus throws off his cloak – his only possession – his blanket and the thing he caught the coins people tossed to him. Unlike the rich man who earlier in the chapter couldn’t let go of his many possessions, Bartimaeus readily lets go of his one possession in order to come to Jesus.*

**Then Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?"**

*Remember, previously when James and John came to Jesus privately to ask for the top two seats in his kingdom, this is the exact same question he asked them. “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.**

*Bartimaeus “followed Jesus on the way” – which means that right then and there he became a disciple, following Jesus to the cross.*

***Thus ends reading of the lesson, may God bless our hearing of the word.***

I want to reflect this morning on the experience of being “invisible” in the sense of not really being seen in one’s full humanity – one’s soul.

Bartimaeus spends his days living on the fringe of his community, begging at the city gate. Alone at the bottom of the social ladder, he is invisible to his community.

Others see him, but only in a very limited sense. They don't see Bartimaeus' distinct humanity – what we might call his “soul”. He survives on the alms people give him. Those in the community who had the means and the motivation to obey God's law would have found in Bartimaeus the opportunity to fulfill the law's requirements that they give alms to the poor. Toss a coin into his cloak and they would have done their duty. They don't really see him.

When Bartimaeus cries out to Jesus, the people around him try to shut him up – which is to say, they seek to keep him invisible. The people, occupying their place in the ladder of status want Bartimaeus to remain at the bottom of that ladder as a “nobody.”

This is a distinct and very real experience of being rendered invisible by people who find themselves living on the margins whether as a result of poverty or some other quality that makes them unwelcome in mainstream society. But the story invites us to consider other ways in which a person can be invisible.

For instance, throughout the Gospel there is a way in which Jesus himself is invisible. Countless people have been craning their necks to get a glimpse of Jesus, but they haven't really seen him – seen Jesus as he understands himself. They see rather what they want him to be.

Even the disciples who have spent a great deal of time living closely with Jesus fail to see him clearly. In the story right before this James and John make this clear in their request for seats of glory: They see Jesus as a messiah who will overthrow the kingdom presently in power and install his kingdom. In their minds Jesus' kingdom will be fundamentally the same as other kingdoms – only with the “right” people – namely themselves – at the top of the hierarchy.

Loneliness goes hand and hand with not being truly seen, and there is a kind of loneliness with which Jesus is burdened throughout his ministry – seen but not truly known.

We live in a culture that is obsessed with fame, not to mention wealth. The face of a famous person may be recognizable to millions of people, but who truly knows the person underneath the celebrity? People who become famous inevitably find their celebrity a burden – they are seen, but who really knows them?

There is another level to the experience of being unseen and that is the state in which we are invisible to ourselves. This sounds crazy, right. But it is quite possible that we don't really know ourselves on the deepest level: that is – to be without an answer to the question: *who am I beyond the roles I fulfill?*

It's hard to pin down exactly what is meant by the “soul”, but part of what is being pointed to when we speak of our souls is our deepest, truest self – our deepest passions. Although there are ways in which all souls are similar, there is also a sense in which each person's soul is absolutely unique.

Jesus spoke earlier in the Gospel of how it is possible for a person to “*gain the whole world but to lose their soul*”. We are born into this world with our souls in tack – that is – as little children we naturally are the distinct individuals that God made us to be. Joy abounds.

But we live in a sin sick world, and that means that invariably we experience wounds that separate us from our souls.

We get lost. Real joy becomes less and less common. We are given roles to play, and as important as the roles may be, these roles are not our souls. Stress-driven lives tend to lose that distinction.

I am a pastor, I am a father, I am a husband – all important parts of my life – but something precious is lost if I have no sense of myself as being far more than these roles.

The world will discourage us from paying attention to what evokes the deepest passions of our lives – what gives us joy and makes us feel most alive. Endless distractions are offered us that keep us from listening for the voice of our soul.

Pleasures abound, but not so much joy. Pleasure and joy are not the same.

The world tells us to pay no attention to what gives us joy – no focus on money and status and comfort. Take a job that pays well and conveys status – don’t worry about whether your job gives opportunity for your soul to sing.

There are various ways to understand what Jesus meant when he said, “*Unless you turn and become like a little child you will never enter the kingdom of God,*” but perhaps part of what he meant was for us to rediscover that soul we lost contact with as we grew up.

So here is a fascinating aspect of this story: Although Bartimaeus is in one sense the most pitiable of people -- living on the margins of his community, invisible to others -- mysteriously Bartimaeus is the person least invisible to himself. His connection to his own soul is strong enough to withstand the attempts of the crowd to pressure him back into being invisible: They tell him to shut up – to stop calling attention to himself and his deepest desires – but he cries out all the more loudly.

And notice this, in spite of his physical blindness, Bartimaeus is the person who has most clearly “seen” Jesus – recognized him as the merciful messiah -- that in a certain sense Bartimaeus has penetrated the loneliness of Jesus by grasping the truth of his identity.

Hearing his soulful cry, Jesus calls for Bartimaeus to be brought to him and in doing so, suddenly Bartimaeus is no longer invisible to his community.

Bartimaeus throws off his single possession to come to Jesus. Perhaps the reason the rich man couldn’t let go of his many possessions was that they provided him with an identity as a man of stature, and out of touch with his soul, losing all his money meant he would lose the only self he knew.

Notice the question Jesus asks Bartimaeus – the same question he asked James and John – “*What do you want me to do for you?*” This is a question -- when asked as Jesus is asking it – that invites a person to go deep – to make contact with their soul.

It is striking that Jesus asks Bartimaeus this question given that it might seem obvious what he desires – he is, after all, a “blind beggar.” And yet, Jesus doesn’t view him merely as the category of “blind beggar”. He invites Bartimaeus to express for himself his deepest longing.

When Jesus asked the same question of James and John, the answer they gave didn’t arise from the depths of their souls. It arose instead from what the world had taught them to focus on: status and power and comfortable seats.

*So here are a couple of takeaways from this story.*

First, ponder the question Jesus asked both Bartimaeus and James and John, “*What do you want me to do for you?*” How would you respond to this question? Be wary of the first answer that pops to your mind. Take time. Go deeper. What are your deepest longings? In finding answers to this question, we come in touch with our souls.

Second, following Jesus involves seeking to interact with people in such a way that they experience themselves as truly being seen.

It means acknowledging that the people with whom we live closest possess a soul – that there is more to them than we know – than they know. It means asking who they are in themselves as opposed to who our anxious ego needs them to be.

This is a life-long process. Even as we recently passed our 28<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary, Sarah and I often find ourselves surprised by our continually deepening knowledge of one another.

It also means looking at strangers – for instance people we encounter in roles they fill – the sales clerk who waits on us, the doctor who treats us -- and recognizing that there is vastly more to them than these roles – that they too have souls.

And finally, the story of the connection made between Bartimaeus and Jesus is a story of hope. When the world would in various ways render us invisible as it sought to do to Bartimaeus – the possibility always exists of going inward to discover the reality of our souls.

We don’t need to wait for the people around us to tell us that our lives truly matter.

There is this mystery expressed in the story: when we reclaim our souls – our utterly distinct, God-given self – our deepest innate truth – a conviction arises within us that the one who gave us life wants us to be whole. Faith awakens where the soul is rediscovered.

When Bartimaeus hears of Jesus and that he is passing by the very place he is sitting – his soul rises up within him with joy. He knows instinctively that Jesus is merciful – and that in connecting with Jesus he can made whole.

*“Your faith has made you whole,”* Jesus said to Bartimaeus, implying Bartimaeus had participated in his healing by claiming the truth of his soul.

The wholeness of which Jesus speaks began to take hold when Bartimaeus cried out to Jesus and refused to be silenced by those who would push him back into the realm of the unseen.

The deepest truth is that although others may fail to truly see you – and although there may be times when even you can’t see yourself – God always sees you. You were created by God out of love bigger than any of us can grasp. God made you who you are, and wants you to be you – an absolutely unique and beloved you. God wants you to know yourself, this wondrous creation God delighted in bringing into existence. God doesn’t want you to hide your light under a bushel. Let your precious light shine.