

“Your Faith Has Made You Well”  
Sermon Preached by David D. Colby  
Central Presbyterian Church  
October 29, 2006  
Scripture: Mark 10:46-52

It is a memorable incident. Jesus, traveling with the disciples and a large crowd gets interrupted by the insistent and noisy beggar, blind Bartimaeus. And Jesus, after asking what he wants, says, “your faith has made you well” and restores his sight.

Who among us does not come here hoping for healing? Maybe you wouldn’t call it that. Maybe you wouldn’t stand up in the middle of the service, like blind Bartimaeus, and shout out to Jesus while you are here. Yet, I would wager that we all come here seeking healing of some sort.

- Some come here today with a lingering regret over something you did, or failed to do and cannot seem to move on.
- Some come seeking healing from a disease.
- Some come in search of healing from anxiety or depression.
- Some come fresh from another round of arguments, where harsh words lead to more harsh words, and come here hoping for healing.
- Some come with a sense of chronic restlessness<sup>i</sup>, that nothing in our life is quite good enough and we want to be blessed with a sense of wholeness.
- Some come with insecurities or long-buried injuries,<sup>ii</sup> so hidden that we hardly recognize our need of healing.

We are, all of us, a bit like Bartimaeus, in need of Jesus’ healing.

It is not a coincidence that the word for healing, in both the Greek and Hebrew languages that the Bible was first written in, is linked to the concepts of wholeness and salvation. Healing, wholeness, salvation – that is the longing at the heart of the Biblical dream. And, so, like Bartimaeus, we come in search of a faith that will make us well. But we come with some skepticism, for we know that there is a lot of faith out there that will not make us well.

That faith Jesus recognized in Bartimaeus too easily gets corrupted and stale as it gets passed down. Too easily, faith becomes self-righteousness and divisive, rather than making us well. So every once in a while, we need to go back to that radical source of faith, a faith, like it did with Bartimaeus, faith that can indeed make us well.

Back in the early 1500’s, the Christian faith had become stale, and hardened. Subject to the whims and ambitions of political rulers, faith had become corrupted and captive. In a fearful time not long-removed from the so-called “dark ages” and the plague that killed one third of Europe,<sup>iii</sup> fear and faith became intertwined. And a mindset grew that God was a harsh judge who enjoyed nothing more than weighing the scales of goodness, placing a person on one side and the weight of their sins on the other, and cackling when sins tipped the scales. If we just worked harder, prayed harder, sinned less, than we could earn God’s favor, people thought. The

Catholic Church of that time, enmeshed with political rulers, grew rich seeking what they called “indulgences,” payments in addition to prayers that would show the true remorse of a person, so they said, and speed up the process of God’s forgiveness.

Today we celebrate our heritage as part of the Protestant Reformation that protested against these corruptions of the faith. Two quick caveats – the Roman Catholic Church itself adopted some of these reforms not long after the time of Martin Luther and John Calvin. And in seeking protection from an angry and politically astute Catholic hierarchy, the Reformers sought their own political alliances, with all the benefits and downsides as well.

Those caveats aside, the Reformation helped restore us to a faith that could make us well. Declaring that the gift of faith is freely given by God – by God’s grace alone - that it is not for sale to the highest bidder. At the heart of the Reformation was a radical notion – radical, in the sense that it is at the root of the tradition and the Bible. The radical theological notion that we don’t do good works to earn God’s love. God cannot be bought off by financial indulgences or by good works offered in guilt. Trust that you are loved by God, and how can you help but respond with doing good works? Good works follow in this trust of God’s love, good works done not out of guilt, but out of gratitude.

The mindset of needing to earn God’s love, having to prove ourselves worthy for God’s salvation is a harmful one, but it still exists. Dr. Paula Cooney, who spoke here recently at a reception for her new book, *Willing the Good*, remarked that she has trouble taking on the label of Christian because she doesn’t spend any time wondering about whether she is saved; she hears the gospel message of Jesus pointing her away from selfish concerns and toward concerns for others. But with the rise of Christian fundamentalism and a powerful media apparatus that trumpets these beliefs, lines are being drawn between those who are supposedly in and those who are out: the saved from the damned, the key point of the Reformation is in danger of being lost. John Calvin urged Christians to not spend time selfishly caught up in angst about whether you will be saved when you die. Trust that you are, as he put it, “of the elect,” and go out and confidently live like it.

It is like when hitting instructors of baseball teams tell batters to visualize hitting. If you can see yourself hitting a curve ball, then you will be able to hit it, they teach. Same with being a Christian. If you can visualize yourself loved and healed by God, then you will live with joy and respond in faith.

We are, I believe, in need of a new breakthrough in theological thinking today. We have allowed labels of faith to be a dividing issue – creating and sustaining an us against them mentality. Liberals from conservatives. Evangelicals from mainliners. Christians from Muslims. Those who are deserving of healing from those who are freeloaders. Us versus them, and surely God is on our side.

As Barack Obama says in his new book, *The Audacity of Hope*, we have “seen faith calcify into self-righteousness, closed-mindedness, and cruelty toward others.”<sup>iv</sup>

The key question today is how to overcome black and white thinking and the sense that everything is a zero-sum game. Fundamentalism is on the rise around the world and its basic belief that transcends any particular fundamentalist religion, is that I have the truth and if you disagree you are wrong. The natural outgrowth is, of course, that in heavenly matters if I have the truth and you are wrong – than I know God and you must not. The rise of fundamentalism is, of course, at the root of much of our conflicts: in the middle east, in Africa, in America. Jesus' words, "Judge not that you not be judged," has been ignored or rationalized away.

For our faith to make us well again, we must reclaim a second Reformed theological emphasis: that God is sovereign. That God alone knows the fullness of truth. And that God remains at least partially obscured by our human limitations. And therefore, that our truth is, at best, partial, when it comes to heavenly matters.

In one of the most succinct and deeply theological paragraphs that has made it into the mainstream media in recent years. Conservative blogger Andrew Sullivan wrote in Time magazine recently,

If God really is God, then God must, by definition, surpass our human understanding. Not entirely. We have Scripture; we have reason; we have religious authority; we have our own spiritual experiences of the divine. But there is still something we will never grasp, something we can never know--because God is beyond our human categories. And if God is beyond our categories, then God cannot be captured for certain. We cannot know with the kind of surety that allows us to proclaim truth with a capital T. There will always be something that eludes us. If there weren't, it would not be God.<sup>v</sup>

We are all forced to realize that most of the time we, like blind Bartimaeus, have limited vision. We walk around with blinders on to reality as God sees it. We need to be healed of mistaking our partial vision as the whole and complete truth. And yet, we have seen a big part of God's truth. And that is that the great God of glory who creates all things is the same God of grace who redeems us in the healing powers of Jesus. We are saved and renewed neither by our actions nor our beliefs, but by the grace of God alone.<sup>vi</sup>

It's all grace. It is all God's grace, that none of us can earn but only enjoy. Go, Jesus said to the once-blind Bartimaeus, "your faith has made you well." May we go out in confidence that once again, faith will make us well. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Barack Obama uses this phrase, "chronic restlessness," in his new book, The Audacity of Hope (New York: Crown Publishers, 2006) 3

<sup>ii</sup> Again, Obama's use of phrase "insecurities or long-buried injuries." Ibid, 48.

<sup>iii</sup> [www.insecta-inspecta.com/fleas/bdeath](http://www.insecta-inspecta.com/fleas/bdeath)

<sup>iv</sup> Obama, 56.

<sup>v</sup> Andrew Sullivan, "When Not Seeing is Believing," Time 9 October, 2006, 60.

<sup>vi</sup> These two sentences are key Reformed beliefs, and are stated this way by Douglas Ottati, Theology for Liberal Presbyterians and Other Endangered Species (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2006) 5.