

Luke 18.31-43
Quinquagesima
23 February 2020
St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Topeka, Kansas

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Beloved in the Lord: Grace be unto you and peace from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Hear again this Word of God from the Gospel: “[Jesus said:], ‘[The Son of Man] will be delivered over to the Gentiles and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon. And after flogging Him, they will kill Him, and on the third day He will rise.’ But they understood none of these things. This saying was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said.”

Oremus: haec, pater sancte, verba tua sunt, etc.

Some 700+ years before the event of the Gospel lesson for today, the prophet Isaiah [6.9-10] received this from the Lord:

Go to this people, and say, “You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive. For this people’s heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn.”

Jesus spoke repeated those words to His disciples when He told His first parables in Matthew. Later on, Paul heaped them like burning coals on the heads of the Jews in Rome who would not believe. And those words haunt virtually every passage of the New Testament, as they do here.

What a horrifying thing it is to see without seeing and to hear without hearing. To have perfect word-level comprehension but not to get the meaning of the words. To have 20/20 vision, but not to assimilate what the eyes see.

It would be like having a photographic memory, but no capacity to put it all together. Leaving you with millions of unrelated facts floating around in your brain and no way to put them to use. Even worse, because you had a memory like that, you’d think you were smart, though you lacked all wisdom.

That’s what it’s like for the seeing blind and the hearing deaf in the Bible. The only difference is, in the Bible it’s not a matter of the head. It’s a matter of the heart.

Now get this. In the Gospel for today this is now the 3rd time Jesus has said He here says—that He must suffer, die, and rise again. Three times! When Jesus got done saying that, Luke notes, “They understood none of these things. This saying was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said.”

Seeing they do not see. Hearing they do not hear.

Now look, any one of you could take the same exact words Jesus spoke here, take them out on the street, read them verbatim to anyone, just like you heard a minute ago, ask that person to tell you what you had just said, and they’d get it spot on. The words are as clear as if I said, “It’s raining out.”

But this is not a matter of the head. It’s a matter of the heart. The eyes are seeing. The brain is processing. The ears are hearing. And the language is clear.

But God's Word isn't intended to go from the lips to the ear, from the ear to the brain, and stop there. It's intended to go from the lips to the ear, from the ear to the brain, and from the brain to heart. For whomever the Word stops at the brain—of them the Holy Spirit's words in Isaiah are true: hearing they do not hear, and seeing they do not see.

Of course, they think they see and hear. Everything's working right.

But that's just the problem—and a problem you're not unfamiliar with.

You see, Jesus' words—they are life and salvation. In them you see the depth of God's love for you. That God did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all! That the Son of God Himself condescended to take on human flesh—not for Himself, but for you—and laid aside the glory of His majesty. That God in His great mercy toward you didn't exact from you the death that by rights is yours, but slew His own Son in your place and called His death your death! And that God Himself on His holy cross suffered the hell you've earned in order to give you His own heaven.

But if you're one of the seeing non-seers and one of those hearing non-hearers, those words stay firmly in the brain and don't get an inch closer to the heart. They don't touch your life.

And they don't touch your life because you think they aren't—they can't be—any more meaningful than something like “in 1492 Columbus sailed the ocean blue.” Just a fact.

That's where the disciples were.

And that should be enough to scare holy hell out of anyone.

Because the disciples, were after all, pious men! They'd dropped nets and left tax-booths and given up whatever else. Just left it behind. And followed Jesus!

And now it's three years on. They were God's go-fers. They lived like Christians. They became fishers of men. They didn't collect money, they distributed it to the poor. And whenever Jesus talked, they listened.

Just like you.

Every one of you—you're pious.

Piety brings you here Sunday after Sunday. Christian propriety drives you to send your kids to TLS and catechesis, to spend money, time and talent on church and school, to bring food for the poor, and checks for the missionaries. And in that way, you're just like the disciples.

But for all that piety, still the disciples weren't Christians.

And that couldn't be more obvious. Because when Jesus—for the third time now—told them the *central message of Christianity*—of God's great, condescending love that slays His Son instead of the sinner—they just didn't get it.

And they didn't get it because they had it all figured differently. It was their piety that made them holy, not Christ. It was their generosity toward the poor that made them acceptable before God, not Christ's poverty on their behalf. It was their active evangelism that marked them as special, not their having been called by the Gospel.

What an easy mistake that is!

Now look, some brands of “Christianity” specialize in this. What makes you a Christian is your quiet times with God. What proves your faith before God and men is how many notches you carry on your evangelism belt, the size and popularity of the church you attend, whether you have conversations with God (as if God talked back).

But the only reason such brands of “Christianity” can even exist is because they find fertile soil for their heresy in every human heart.

Even in yours.

The disciples themselves would’ve probably been attracted to a church like that.

And what that means is that there aren’t a few of you here today who’ve made your piety and your Christian proprieties out to be the sum and total of being a Christian.

If you have, then you’ll be among those who on the Last Day will say, “Lord, Lord! Did we not do all these things Your name?” And He will declare to you, “I never knew you.”

For seeing you do not see, and hearing you do not hear.

So on your knees! And pray God in heaven to give you His Holy Spirit so that by His grace you may believe His holy Word.

You see, at this point, the disciples are confident in their own sight, in their own hearing.

What a blessing, then, for them to encounter immediately a living object lesson—old blind Bartimaeus. For seeing, the disciples do not see. But not seeing, old blind Bartimaeus sees.

You see, Bartimaeus’ blindness is the outward expression of his inward condition. It is the seeing who do not see! Confident in their own *sight*—confident in themselves—they cannot receive the sight the Lord gives, the sight that sees and knows nothing except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. The sight that recognizes its own helpless blindness and knows that to see it must be given sight.

Such was Bartimaeus. Helpless in his blindness, the only sight Bartimaeus had was faith in Him alone who restores sight, Jesus Christ, the Son of David.

And over blind old Bartimaeus Jesus pronounced a blessing that was the very opposite of His curse over those who cry out, “Lord, Lord, look what I’ve done! Look what I am!” He said, “See. Regain your sight. Your faith has saved you.”

In anticipation of the resurrection of all flesh through His own resurrection. In anticipation of the restoration of life and the image of God in His own restoration to life ... Jesus gave Bartimaeus in the here and now one of those gifts all believers in Christ will receive on the last day. Christ broke the ravages of sin Bartimaeus was afflicted with. Eyes were meant for seeing, not be for being dark. And through faith in this Son of God who would be betrayed to the Gentiles, mocked, beaten up, spat upon, whipped and killed ... for him! and for his sins! ... eternity broke in on Bartimaeus. What he would be in the resurrection he began to become in the here and now.

You see, no matter how pious your life and no matter how many Christian proprieties you practice, even if you call yourself a disciple, a Christian, or even a Missouri Synod Lutheran—none of that makes you a Christian. None of that saves. The disciples followed Jesus for three years. Bartimaeus called to Him from the side of the road and was a stranger to Him. The disciples gave money to the poor; Bartimaeus begged his living from the likes of the disciples. And Bartimaeus was certainly no fisher of men, but a man fished by Christ.

But it wasn't the disciples who didn't see but saw. It was Bartimaeus.

For he had faith.

Faith that David's Son was God's Son. Faith that God's Son in David's flesh came to break the curse of sin and death—even by dying.

Fellow-redeemed: today is the last Sunday before Lent, when we take the long 40-day path to the central mystery of the holy Christian faith, the death of Jesus Christ, God's Son. Jesus would have brought His disciples there with Him. But seeing they did not see.

As you enter Lent, enter not as the 12 who disbelieved, but as Bartimaeus. Despair of your own seeing. On Wednesday when you receive the ashes on your forehead take to heart not only the words that accompany them, "Remember that thou art dust and to dust thou shalt return," but remember why that is. How you're not only tinged and totally corrupted by Adam's sin, but have even added to it. How the death you are to remember is your fault, your own fault, in the words we'll use for confession in our evening Lenten services. How by your own most grievous fault you've lived and believed more like the disciples than like Bartimaeus. How that has made your love for God grow cold, and your love for neighbor even colder. How there's nothing you can do to rescue yourself from your sinful condition. How your own sins and no one else's were the nails pounded into the wrists of the Son of God.

That's what Bartimaeus did. Because he *saw* his lost condition, he was able to *see*—and believe in—the Son of God. His Savior from sin, death, and the devil.

And his faith in that Son of God, well, it saved him.

Amen.

pax dei, etc.

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