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National Presbyterian Church

Following Jesus: "Blind Faith?"

Luke 18:35-19:10

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In our sermons through the winter we're looking at the story of Jesus through the eyes of one of the four accounts we have in the Bible: the account of St. Luke. And we come this morning to the two stories we've just read from Chapters 18 and 19, about two people who begin to follow Jesus.

1. A blind person who receives his sight (named in Mark 10:46 as Bartimaeus)
2. And a chief tax collector, Zacchaeus, who'd become rich working for the enemy occupiers: the Romans

Both stories take place at a particular moment in Jesus ministry, as he heads towards Jerusalem for the last time, there to be arrested and put to death, crucified on a cross. In fact, for the past nine chapters, Jesus has been on his final journey (in Luke 9:51 we're told that "Jesus set his face towards Jerusalem").

SO 60% of the story is pointing us in the direction of the end, toward both Jesus' ultimate sacrifice for our sins, and also his resurrection, which brings the reign of death to an end.

This back-loading of the gospel story towards the end, is like a statement coming from Luke, hinting that *everything else in the story needs to be read in the light of the end*:

- This Jesus, the One caring for people, healing and teaching in all these stories, is the one who, in the end
 - will suffer and die because of love for us
 - and will rise again because of love for us
- and the reason why it's so important to listen to him, and to follow his lead now
 - is because of what he does FOR US -- AT THE END!

But that's not all, of course. It's not just because of *WHAT JESUS DOES* for us even in his death and resurrection at the end (these amazing gifts of love) that we listen to Jesus and follow him. Rather, it's also because of *WHO HE IS* – the greatness and uniqueness of his person: this too is why we listen and follow.

And this is a theme that runs all the way through the Gospel story and into today's passage where this blind man, Bartimaeus, calls out to Jesus with a name: he calls him "the Son of David" – which means that he sees Jesus' identity as a person of significant authority, indeed, as a claimant to the throne of Israel; a person who commands his attention.

And this morning I'd like us to begin our study by tracing the question of Jesus' identity through the Gospel of Luke, so that you and I will join Bartimaeus in asking (and answering) the question "Who is Jesus?" for ourselves – which is what, I believe, Luke wants us, his readers, to do . . .

And a place to begin is with three stories where the question about Jesus' identity is asked explicitly. So, for example:

1. We find **Jesus' opponents** asking the question on one occasion when Jesus forgives a man's sins: they are angered by this action and ask with a sneer: "Who is this that speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (5:21)
2. And then we find the question on the lips of **Jesus' friends** when Jesus calms a storm on the Sea of Galilee, In their fear they ask
 "Who then is this, that he commands even the wind and the water, and they obey him?" (8:25)
3. And then there's a third occasion, when **Jesus himself presents the question** to his followers, "Who do you say that I am?" And Simon Peter replies on behalf of the group saying, "You are the Christ of God."

And Jesus doesn't deny it!!

And the same kind of "lofty" answer is given by multiple voices in various stories in Luke's account of Jesus as well, even when the question is not explicit.

SO

- There's the **voice of the angels** at Jesus' birth – who name him as "the Son of the Most High God, a Savior who is the Messiah King" (Luke 1:32-36, 2:11)
- and the **voice of the old man Simeon** who meets Jesus as a baby, and declares that he is the embodiment of "God's Salvation, a light for all peoples" (2:30)
- and the **voice of John the Baptist**, his older cousin, the greatest historical figure in first century Judaism, who sees Jesus as "mightier by far than he" (2:16).
- and the **voice of the Holy Spirit** – the voice of God – at Jesus' baptism, who says "This is my Son, the beloved, listen to him" (3:22)
- And then, most surprising of all, there are **voices of the Demons and the Devil** who clearly understand his identity as their arch-enemy. So that in the story of Jesus' temptation by Satan, at the center of the temptation is the attempt to get Jesus to doubt his own identity as the Son of God:
 - **Satan** begins two of his three temptations by sowing this kind of doubt through the pernicious phrase "If you are the Son of God" (4:3 - *turn stone to bread*; 4:9 - *throw yourself down*). This temptation is something the devil would never had said, unless he actually knew that it was true, and critical in the ministry of Jesus
 - And then – even more surprisingly, there's **the voice of the Demons**, Satan's minions, who on at least three occasions themselves cry out (4:34,41; 8:28), saying "I know who you are! The Holy One of God!" Or, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?"

So this issue of Jesus' identity (*who he is*) . . . and our need to make a decision about it (*who he is to US*) literally runs through the whole Luke's story of Jesus from the beginning to the very end. So that . . .

- Not only (we are to ask) is he the one who loves us enough to suffer and die for us, and to rise again to life for us?
- But, Is he the Son of God?

- And is he the Son of God, to us? Our Messiah King?

And in a sense, there's a bottom line that immediately follows *IF HE IS*, and it concerns our willingness to take action on the basis of who he is to us:

- *Will we do whatever it takes – no matter what people say or think*
 - *To find a way to draw close to him?*
 - *To listen to HIS voice above every other voice*
 - *Allowing him to change us*
 - *As we follow him?*

Which brings us to our passage today, which tells us not only that BLIND BARTIMAEUS had asked himself “Who is Jesus to me” (to Bartimaeus he is “*The Son of David,*” *Israel’s greatest king*), but that his answer was not just in his head, but had found its way into his heart and hands and feet, so much so that *no obstacle would get in the way of his seeing Jesus face-to-face, and allowing Jesus to use his love and power to change and heal him.*

Indeed, when he heard that Jesus was about to pass through his home town of Jericho, he created such a ruckus to get Jesus’ attention, that the crowd that had gathered to see Jesus tried to dismiss him, telling him to “*Hush!*” -- as if they were sure that Jesus would never be interested in anyone like him.

^{18:35} As Jesus approached Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging. ³⁶ When he heard a crowd going by, he asked what was happening. ³⁷ They told him, “Jesus of Nazareth is passing by.”

³⁸ Then he shouted, “*Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!*”

³⁹ Those who were in front sternly ordered him to be quiet;

(so he became quiet?! NO!! . . . rather . . .)

he shouted even more loudly, “*Son of David, have mercy on me!*”

And clearly, he caught Jesus’ attention, probably both by his noisy persistence, as well as by pointing out his identity as “The Son of David” – the Messiah King; the one with authority over his life. And Jesus responds by doing *nothing to deny the title*, but simply stops, and uses his power to help.

And so too with RICH, SHORT ZACCHAEUS in the next story, a few moments later, further down the same road in Jericho. Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus too! But not just that: the text tells us that he actually wanted not just to see Jesus visually with his eyes but to see who *Jesus* “was” in terms of his identity, too.

But Zacchaeus had two strikes against him that affected his ability to see Jesus, even though unlike Bartimaeus he was not physically blind.

First: He was a tax collector. He worked for the wrong people, the enemy Romans, and on behalf of the Romans and with their support, he was making a financial killing off the backs of his own people. No one in their right mind would give this traitor, cheat, and heretic a front row seat to see Jesus! And certainly no one in this particular crowd that had already pushed a blind man off to the side to prevent him “seeing.”

Second: Zacchaeus was short. He couldn’t see over the top of the crowd (as with Bartimaeus there was a physical limitation between him and Jesus). So (we read in 19.4)

he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see Jesus, because Jesus was going to pass that way.

And both of these acts (running and climbing) were embarrassing for someone of his prominence in society. In the middle eastern world, you didn't run! It was beneath your dignity. And then, to climb a tree, well, that was downright humiliating (think of Zacchaeus wearing the best suit and shoes in town . . . Armani! . . . as he climbed).

In other words, something powerful had to have been stirring in his soul to make him do such things. And, as with the Blind Man, Jesus noticed . . . and both lives were transformed. With Blind Bartimaeus:

⁴⁰Jesus stood still and ordered the man to be brought to him; and when he came near, he asked him, ⁴¹*"What do you want me to do for you?"* He said, "LORD, let me see again." (remember the title)

⁴²Jesus said to him, *"Receive your sight; your faith has saved you."*

⁴³Immediately he regained his sight and followed him, glorifying God

And then, with Zacchaeus

⁵When Jesus came to the tree, he looked up and said to him: *"Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; (he knows his name) for I must stay at your house today."* ⁶So he hurried down and was happy to welcome Jesus. ⁷All who saw it began to grumble and said, *"He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner."* ⁸Zacchaeus stood there and said to the LORD (remember the title), "Look, half of my possessions, LORD, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I'll pay back four times as much."

So Zacchaeus is a transformed person too, just like Bartimaeus. With Jesus being to both of them now,

- not just "the Son of David" (human royalty),
- nor even just "the Son of God" (divine),
- but their "LORD," their boss! Their divine boss, because in the Old Testament scripture the word "Lord" was the pre-eminent title used repeatedly for God himself!
- In other words, Jesus had become in both faith and practice, *their "God."*

And it was because of

- this questioning of his identity: *Who is He?*
- and this growing vision or insight into his identity
- despite their physical and spiritual limitations (for both Rich and Short Zacchaeus and Blind Bartimaeus)

that they became willing to do whatever it took, no matter what people said or did to push them away

- *to draw close to him, and stay close to him*
- *to listen to HIS voice above every other voice*
- *and to follow.*

I've mentioned a number of times in recent weeks that with Jesus in Luke's Gospel, the topic of money is *more* prominent than in the other Gospel accounts. In Luke, for Jesus, one of the

primary signs of an inner transformed life is seen in the way that we handle our material possessions.

And while this does not come into focus in the way that Bartimaeus changed his life for Jesus (probably he had no financial resources to begin with!) it is certainly a key component in the transformation of Zacchaeus, leading Zacchaeus to say to Jesus (once he SEES him)

- “Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor;
- and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I’ll pay back four times as much.”

Two things to notice here by way of conclusion.

The First is that Jesus does not tell Zacchaeus that his response is not sufficient! He hasn’t done enough! He should have given everything all away

Some people get worried because of the black and white pronouncement of Jesus on money, that this “all or nothing” is what Jesus wants from all of us.

For example,

- In Luke 14:33, Jesus says, “*none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.*”
- and earlier in Luke 18 (22), just before Jesus gets to Jericho, Jesus speaks to a man we call “the rich ruler” and says to him:

“There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.”

These words are pretty forceful, and they are words that are *clearly meant to be taken literally by some of Jesus followers*. Francis of Assisi and others have responded to words like these by taking a vow of poverty. And maybe this is God’s word to you or me?!

But, what we need to see as well is that Jesus does not ask “this total giving” of Zacchaeus. Indeed, as far as we know after his conversion to follow Jesus Zacchaeus may have even remained a tax collector working for the Romans. BUT – the change in his life was still radical. . . and it transformed his finances radically too! He did not become poor, but he did become radically generous! So that Now -- he was

- an honest tax collector!!
- A tax collector with a conscience
- A person who cared for his community
- with an ability and passion not just to GET, but to GIVE, not out of compulsion or command of Jesus, but because he had been set free by Jesus, liberated in his soul by Jesus – Son of David, Son of God, his Lord.

Ben Gill, is someone who spent his career as a fund-raiser for Christian organizations. In his book (“The Joy of Giving”) he speaks about his experience like this:

My life has been spent helping people learn the gift of giving.

After 25 years in this pursuit I’ve come now to tell you that one fact has become increasingly clear:

The happiest people on Earth are the people who learn the joy of giving.

In fact, over the years (he writes) I’ve come to appreciate more and more the model of generosity set for me by my mother. My father passed away when I was less than a year old

and my mother with two young sons set out to make a life for us. She tilled the soil of an Arkansas farm to scratch out a living.

When I became ill with asthma she moved us to New Mexico and worked for the Atomic Laboratory at Los Alamos. Through all of this she taught us to give.

We went to church and we were expected to put our nickel or dime in the offering envelope. But the lessons also carried over into the world around us. No one in need was ever turned away from our door. Giving was a way of life in the Gill household. I thank her for setting that example in *the joy of giving*.

No compulsion but a passion, driven by the Christ, her Lord.

And this, I believe is what Zacchaeus experienced too.

And no doubt Bartimaeus, in his own way, with his new-found sight

When these two people came face-to face with who Jesus *REALLY WAS* they both allowed Jesus to change them.

May we too, ponder and come to know this same Jesus: *What he does for us* in his death and resurrection (*at the end of the story*); and *Who he is for us in his identity*. Not only “the royal Son of David.” Nor even just “the Son of God.” But our LORD.

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