

Blind spots - Living by the Word

By Pastor Mary Anderson

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EVEN THE COMMON lectionary cannot hold ecumenical friends together this Sunday. Some of us will depart from the scripture texts and focus on the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century. Some of us will center on the Mark 10 story of Jesus' encounter with Bartimaeus. I want to acknowledge these different directions, and also reflect on the thematic connection between Bartimaeus's blindness and our history of reformation.

Healing stories in the Gospels never seem to be simply a reversal of physical misfortune. A paralyzed man stands and walks. A man stretches out a withered hand to Jesus and sees it become useful again. A girl who was pronounced dead awakens. Particularly suspicious are the stories of those who "once were blind, but now they see." The connections between seeing and believing are so strong in the Gospel accounts that these miracles worked through Jesus almost always seem more about growing in faith than taking off dark glasses. Though Bartimaeus was blind to many things, he clearly saw who Jesus was. Seeing "who Jesus is" is the goal of faith, and it leads to discipleship. Only the unblind can see where to follow. Indeed, at the end of the story we're told that this is exactly what happened. Bartimaeus regained his sight and followed Jesus on the way. Given that the very next verse in Mark narrates the entry into Jerusalem, the way Bartimaeus followed was the way to the cross.

Physical sight is not required for discipleship, but restoration is. Again and again in history, prophesy and gospel, God works through miracle, through political forces, through social action and through ordinary living to pick us up from where we have fallen and redirect us along right pathways. Blind Bartimaeus calls from the gutter until the Lord hears him. Then he returns to the Lord and is restored, I picture him, the last recruit in, the discipleship army, marching toward Jerusalem with palm branch in hand.

Those who return to the Lord are restored, the Bible instructs. But how do we come to the point of return? Sometimes we make it sound easy and quick. I'm fairly skeptical of the 180 degree, born-again, overnight kind of return. Some changes are no doubt fast and immediate, but the changes that endure unto the generations are the result of a process of human or divine origin. Our returning to the Lord for restoration is a process which may be described in many ways.

Reformation is one of those ways. As people of the 21st century, we may be more in tune with some of reformation's synonyms, which also begin with "r": renovation, reorganization, restructuring. These are, interestingly, words we use in large corporate settings rather than small personal ones. The church, the corporate body of Christ, is a voice that calls for the wandering to return and then hosts the restoration banquet. In order to fulfill this mission, it must constantly be reforming. And yet most church folk know all too well that many "r" words can be fighting words in congregations. While many Protestant congregations (especially Lutheran ones) are willing to celebrate the Reformation of October 31, 1517, with pride and pomp, reformation's synonyms--renovate, reorganize, restructure--can be sources of conflict. All of these words indicate that something will be changed. And change is often heard as a synonym for "loss."

We enjoy 20/20 hindsight vision, proud of reformations past even as we are blind to the present need for reformation and restoration. This is true not only of the 16th century, but of the 20th century as well. Our nation recently recognized the 40th anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech. Though the reformation of racism in America is ongoing, much has changed in the past 40 years. When King was preaching and protesting in the '60s, many of the adults in my life were shaking their southern heads and lamenting all the trouble he was causing. Decades later, this "troublemaker" is a martyr and a hero, whose birthday is a national holiday. I continue to be amazed at our collective blindness to the effects of racism and poverty in those days. My children shake their heads at the stories of segregation in schools, restaurants and doctors' offices, unable to believe such things took place in their parents' lifetimes.

These are the rhythms of reformation. The troublemakers become heroes. The radical new ways eventually become beloved traditions. We are always moving from blindness to sightedness, from unfaithfulness to faithfulness. On days such as this, I am less interested in how the church was reformed than I am in recalling the lessons of reformation. Reformations teach us that we continue to need reform.

What corners of the church, of society, need serious reformation in this 21st century? Where are our blind spots? Will a reformer arise among us? Should one arise, what will we do to him or her? What do we allow to go unchallenged today that will one day cause our grandchildren to shake their heads at how blind we were to the gospel?