

October 25, 2015
Reformation Sunday and 22nd Sunday After Pentecost
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Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, IA

Jeremiah 31:7-9
Psalm 126
Hebrews 7:23-28
Mark 10:46-52

[Click here to read scripture passages](#)

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

Jesus said to Bartimaeus “your doctrines have made you well.”

Right? That’s what he said, right?

Maybe not; how about “you believe the right things and understand correctly and that has made you well”???

You belong to the right group and your group has the best theology?

Not so much.

Your faith has made you well.

So what is faith?

Lutherans talk a lot about faith, especially around Reformation Day, because it was a fairly important topic for Martin Luther, our namesake.

But what is faith? How does it work? How does it develop in us?

The story of Bartimaeus can give us a fuller picture than we sometimes have.

Often we think faith is all about beliefs, that having faith means that we agree with certain claims about God and the world.

Certainly, beliefs, doctrines and theology can inform and help us confess our faith but they aren’t the same thing as faith.

The idea that faith means beliefs has led us to view Christianity as largely an intellectual exercise rather than a way of life that is healing and life giving.

A monk named Fr. Thomas Keating started to realize this when Catholic young people started stopping by his Catholic monastery asking for directions to the nearby Buddhist monastery.

- He asked them why they were going to learn there rather than at a monastery in their own tradition.
- They responded that Buddhism provided a way, a path, and that Christianity was just about beliefs.

Thinking that faith is all about beliefs has also led us to misunderstand the good news lifted up by Martin Luther: that we’re saved by faith and not by our own works.

- If faith is about belief and we’re saved by faith, then we’re saved if we get our beliefs right and think the right things?

- It's like the ultimate A on the test- think all the right things and then you get to go to heaven.

Yet the scriptures, the ancient Christian tradition, and the writings of Martin Luther call us not into correct doctrine but into a living faith, a way of life, a way of being in relationship with God in trust and hope.

This relationship is pure gift, made possible by God who came to us in Jesus and who comes to us again in his Word and body and blood to call us into the way of faith.

And this way of faith heals us, saves us and makes us more fully alive - not because God is rewarding us for good actions or correct beliefs but because the way of faith is what we most need.

Bartimaeus demonstrated this kind of living faith in his encounter with Jesus.

In him we see what faith looks like in practice and how it can make us well.

Bartimaeus called out to Jesus repeatedly, "have mercy on me."

It is healing to call out to God amidst the brokenness of our lives and our world.

When we don't turn to God, we so easily fall into despair, indifference or functional atheism - the idea that if anything good is going to happen around here, I better do it.

All of these are soul crushing ways to live; but prayer provides hope and healing.

Sometimes we see physical healing after we pray. I can't explain it but I've seen it.

More often, we don't see the results we'd like but prayer still has a powerful effect; it changes us.

Prayer draws us outside ourselves.

- It points us to needs beyond us and to a love far greater than our own.
- Prayer joins us to the God of mercy and shapes us to be people who work for mercy, healing and justice in the world.

That's why we begin every worship service asking for God's mercy through a confession or by singing the Kyrie - singing Lord have mercy.

This is why we pray the prayer Jesus taught us and keep asking him to teach us to pray.

Bartimaeus knew that prayer and faith take persistence.

When the crowd sternly ordered him to be quiet, he called out even more loudly. Bartimaeus was not afraid to beg and plead; he knew his own need and persisted in calling out to God.

There are so many circumstances that could prevent us from turning to God and seeking God's mercy.

Yet in worship God gives us what we need to persist in faith and trust.

Each time we come to communion we approach as beggars like Bartimaeus, as people in need; and each time we are given healing, forgiveness, strength and nourishment to persist, whether we feel it or not.

Finally, Bartimaeus demonstrated faith by responding to Jesus' call.

God also calls each of us.

- God calls us into relationships, service, vocations, and purposeful ways of life - this is another central insight of the Reformation.
- God's calls can provide us with meaning, purpose and peace in the midst of challenges.
- Of course, trying to understand how God is calling us is no simple task.

It's easy to think, well Bartimaeus was lucky, he had Jesus right there in front of him in person, calling him to come.

Except, Jesus didn't call Bartimaeus. Jesus told the crowd that had initially tried to silence Bartimaeus to call him to come.

I imagine this was healing for the crowd as well. They also were called out of their own blindness and exclusionary ways and called into Jesus' healing work.

This helps us to see, even when whole communities act in unfaithful ways like the crowd in this story, Jesus keeps calling us all and keeps bringing healing and new life.

God so often works through other people and through community to call to us and nurture faith in us.

We need each other.

The whole ancient and global community of Christ's church strengthens us in faith in so many ways as people pray for us, encourage us and help us to confess the faith of the church in the words of the creeds.

As we speak those ancient beliefs that tell the story of God's relationship with the whole world, we are strengthened and upheld by people throughout the ages and around the world.

Even when we don't understand or individually believe the whole creed, we join our voices and confess that this is our story.

As we speak the words we are often like another man we hear about in the Gospel of Mark who says "I believe, help my unbelief."

Faith is a living relationship with God; it is a way of life that brings healing and hope to our lives and to the world we serve.

Jesus comes to us today to call us again into that relationship and to give us everything we need to follow him on the way, as Bartimaeus did.

Thanks be to God.