

“BLIND BART, A ROLE MODEL?”

Mark 10:46-52; I John 4:19

Dr. Charles D. Yoost, Senior Pastor

Most of you have probably heard of Bart Simpson, the fictional main character of the animated television series, *The Simpsons*. *The Simpsons* have been on television for nearly twenty years. They became popular when my sons were in grade school. At first, we did not allow our children to watch that show. When they got older, they were allowed to watch only after their homework was done. Why? Because the tone of the show and the values expressed by Homer, Marge, Bart, and his sisters, Lisa and Maggie, were not what we wanted our children to emulate. We were especially concerned about the negative influence of Bart, a mischievous student at Springfield Elementary School with a rebellious attitude, and a disrespect for authority. Bart is frequently in trouble, and his pride in underachieving caused not only my wife and me, but many parents and educators to be concerned that Bart Simpson is a bad role model for our children.

Role models are people that kids look up to and take cues for their behavior. Remember a few years ago when NBA basketball player Charles Barclay, was questioned about some of his behavior on and off the court? He replied by saying, “I am not a role model!” The trouble is that Charles Barclay was, and continues to be a role model for millions of children and youth. So is Bart Simpson, the underachiever who is proud of it. Not a role model? In 1998, *Time* magazine name Bart Simpson one of the 100 most important people of the 20th Century. And in April of this year (2009), the U.S. Postal Service unveiled a series of five 44 cent stamps featuring Bart Simpson and the four other members of his family. They were the first characters from a television series still in production to receive this recognition. Whether we like it or not, Bart Simpson has influenced a whole generation of American youth.

In this morning’s New Testament lesson, we read about another person who wasn’t exactly held up as a role model by the leaders of first century society: Blind Bartimaeus, whom we are told was a disciple of Jesus. Frankly, when we think about the disciples of Jesus, I’m pretty sure that Blind Bart is not the first person to come to mind. We may encourage our children to be like Peter — bold and adventuresome, or like John — loving and kind — or like the women who came to the tomb — Mary and Salome and the others — sharing compassion and concern. But Bartimaeus? No one wants their kids to grow up to be a beggar who sits by the side of the road and depends on the pity and generosity of passers by to survive. Nobody then, and nobody now considers Blind Bartimaeus to be a role model for the next generation. Yet, this morning I want us to consider the witness of this man as we prepare to commit our resources to Jesus for the coming year.

When I say that no one wanted their children to grow up like Blind Bart, I am not exaggerating by any means. Blindness today is a devastating and life-limiting condition. In the first century it guaranteed a life of poverty and struggle, almost without exception. No Braille

libraries or electronic devices were available to aid those who were without sight. No helpful cataract surgeries were offered to those whose eyesight had failed with age. Blindness was seen as a curse. It was a dread condition, and those who were blind were forced to the margins of society literally and figuratively.

Now most blind people develop their other senses to a high degree, so it does not surprise us that the Blind Bart heard about Jesus. Indeed, his ears would have perked up at the mention of anyone who purported to be able to offer a cure for this dread condition. News would have spread like wildfire from town to town among the disabled in first-century Palestine — especially when someone appeared to miraculously feed and heal and care for people like them. Perhaps Bartimaeus heard of the blind man brought to Jesus by friends in Bethsaida, and of how Jesus had put saliva on his eyes and restored his sight. Perhaps a relative of Bartimaeus in Capernaum had told him months ago about an itinerant preacher from Nazareth who defied the religious leaders when he healed a man's withered hand.

However it was that Blind Bart learned about Jesus, he was not going to miss his opportunity when he heard the crowd murmuring that Jesus of Nazareth was coming down the road from Jericho. Blind Bart pinned all his hopes on Jesus, and so without hesitation he cried out, "*Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!*" When those around him tried to silence him he raised his voice louder and shouted, "*Son of David, have mercy on me!*"

Have you ever been so desperate, so weary, so spent, that you don't care what anyone else thinks, you just need to have somebody hear and hope that somebody cares? That's how Bartimaeus was feeling that day. If there was any chance at all that he could have his sight restored, he did not want to miss that opportunity.

It must have been the greatest moment of his life when Jesus stopped and told the disciples to call Bartimaeus to come to him. The words of the disciples to Bartimaeus are telling: "*Take heart, get up, he is calling you.*" There is no more wonderful word in the English language than our name, being spoken by one whom we love. Think of it! Jesus has compassion. Jesus calls Bartimaeus, speaks his name, calls to him, invites him to discipleship.

It must have seemed to Blind Bart with all his other senses so keenly attuned, that time was standing still when Jesus stopped on the road, stood still and commanded, "*Call him here!*" And in case we miss the point, the verb "call" is repeated two more times in the next sentence! Now the same crowd that tried to shut Bart up opens a path for him. Bartimaeus doesn't need to be called twice! "*Throwing off his cloak,*" Mark tells us, "*Throwing off the cloak that he used to lay on the ground to collect coins, the Bible tells us that 'he sprang up and came to Jesus.'*" Nor did he hesitate when Jesus asked, "*What do you want me to do for you?*" "*My teacher,*" Bartimaeus exclaims, "*Let me see again!*" Jesus replies, "*Go, your faith has made you well.*" And the Bible tells us that immediately he regained his sight and followed Jesus on the way.

Here is a miracle story with profound implications. For Jesus heals Blind Bart. But more than healing his eyesight, Bartimaeus receives a healing of his spirit. No longer will he have to sit by the road and beg, with his cloak spread out before him. He throws off his old way of life, and follows Jesus.

Jesus healed a lot of people in the New Testament. Most of them we never hear about again. They come to Jesus. They get what they want. They go on about their way. Bible scholars point out that the only person who Jesus heals in the New Testament whose name we know is Blind Bartimaeus. Blind Bart is the only one we know by name. Why? Bible scholars believe that Bartimaeus went on to become a leader in the early church. When these stories were told, it would have meant something in Galilee to say, not "Do you remember the time Jesus

healed that blind beggar?” but “Do you remember when Jesus healed Bartimaeus?,” for he became known throughout the early church.

Why did Blind Bart become known? He became known because he understood I John 4:19, “*We love because he first loved us.*” Bartimaeus was so grateful for what Jesus had done for him, he spent the rest of his life praising God and witnessing to his faith. He was so filled with the love of God that he just had to share that love with others. You see, Jesus not only healed his eyes; Jesus gave Bart a whole new lease on life. He never forgot it! And he never quit telling others about it! He never quit witnessing to what God had done for him.

Have you had your eyes opened to what God is doing in the world today, and what God would like to do through you? Have you had your eyesight restored, or are you still sitting, begging by the side of the road?

Clarence Jordan, the founder of Koinonia Farms, grew up in a prosperous family, and received a Ph. D. in New Testament from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. He was known for his brilliance as a writer, and was on his way to becoming a prominent New Testament scholar and theologian. Instead, he left the seminary to establish an interracial community in Georgia in the mid-1950's, long before the civil rights movement had made inroads into the deep racial prejudice that still plagues our country today. Clarence Jordan expected opposition, but he did not anticipate that it would be led by his own people, the Southern Baptist congregation that eventually excommunicated the whole Koinonia Community. The charges against them read, “*Said members have persisted in holding services where both white and colored attend together.*”(1)

The excommunication was followed by vandalism, cross-burning, legal pressures, beatings, bombing, an economic boycott and shootings by snipers who aimed at any available target on the commune. Clarence turned to his brother, attorney Robert Jordan, for legal counsel, and asked him to represent the Koinonia Community. Robert, who later served as a Georgia State Senator and a justice of the Georgia Supreme Court, declined.

“Clarence, I can’t do that. You know my political aspirations. Why, if I represent you, I might lose my job, my house, everything I’ve got.”

“We might lose everything, too, Bob,” replied Clarence.

“It’s different for you.”

“Why is it different? I remember, it seems to me, that you and I joined the church the same Sunday as boys. When we came forward the preacher asked me the same question he asked you. He asked me, ‘Do you accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?’ And I said, ‘Yes.’ What did you say?”

“I follow Jesus, Clarence, up to a point.”

“Could that point by any chance be — the cross?”

“That’s right, I follow him to the cross, but not on the cross. I’m not getting myself crucified.”

“Then I don’t believe you are a disciple. You are an admirer of Jesus, but not a disciple of Jesus. I think you ought to go back to the church you belong to and tell them you are an admirer, not a disciple.”

“Well now, if everyone who felt like I do did that, we wouldn’t have a church, would we?”

“The question is, do you have a church?”(2)

Jordan, and those who lived on his farm and participated in his New Testament experiment of communal living, continued to be persecuted. The harassment was relentless;

almost ripened crops were torched; guns were fired randomly into farm buildings, crosses were burned beside the driveway.

It was one thing for Jordan to choose to endure such persecution; it was another for an innocent child, and Clarence Jordan was raising a family. One day, his daughter, Jan, came home from school in tears. “What’s wrong, honey?” he asked. She replied, “Oh dad, a lot of the kids are mean, but there’s one boy, who, when he sees me coming down the hallway, comes up and knocks me down. He throws my books down the hallway. He says the ugliest words to me.”

Jordan replied, “Jan, you’ve got long fingernails, why don’t you just scratch his eyes out?” She said, “Well, I thought about that, but I heard you say in your sermon that Jesus said we’re supposed to love our enemy, so I thought I shouldn’t scratch his eyes out.”

“Tell you what. Tomorrow I’ll go to the school, and I’m going to ask Jesus to excuse me from being a Christian for about fifteen minutes while I beat the daylights out of that boy.”

Jan replied, “Daddy, you can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“You can’t be excused from being a Christian, even for fifteen minutes.”(3) And neither can we!

What is God calling you to do today? Blind Bart was so grateful, he spent the rest of his life following Jesus. He loved, because God first loved him. What about us? I truly believe that God is calling us to go deeper in our faith and wider in our witness. He wants us to commit a greater portion of ourselves to him. That will cause us to reach out in a wider embrace to those who have not yet heard of God’s miraculous power and God’s amazing love.

How much is God calling us to give on this commitment Sunday? How much did God give for us? Jesus said, “God loves us this much.” And he stretched out his arms on the cross and died.

What is our next step? Who is our example? Blind Bartimaeus, who not only received his sight, but saw that healing leads to discipleship. Bartimaeus was not just an admirer of Jesus, but a follower. He is remembered through the centuries as a faithful disciple. He never took even fifteen minutes off from being a Christian. He became a role model for the early church, and he is a role model for us today. Like Bartimaeus, let us receive the healing touch of Jesus, and let us follow where he leads.

Notes:

1. Augsburg, David. *Dissident Discipleship: A Spirituality of Self-Surrender, Love of God, and Love of Neighbor*. Brazos Press, 2005., pp. 191-192.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Howell, James. *Servants, Misfits and Martyrs: Saints and Their Stories*. Upper Room: 1999., pp. 47-52.

