

"Your Faith Has Made You Well"

Rev. Dr. Reuben P. Bell

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.

From the lessons today, it is obvious that our topic involves healing--on some level. It does.. But there are elements of the greatest truths of the universe in this deceptively short story of the blind beggar, and we are going to talk about *them*, too. As it turns out, they are all related.

Healing. Now, that word can carry a lot of freight. As a biologist first and then physician, and lastly as a believer in the spiritual life, I am constantly fascinated with the idea of healing. That something could be alive is mystery enough--but to be able to restore itself to wholeness after injury or illness--now *that* is a piece of work! And I can assure you that today, in 1996, with all our scientific knowledge and our dazzling technology, we *still* know very little more about healing on this natural plane than Moses learned from the priests of Egypt. And spiritual healing, like we have read about today? Don't ask. Our culture is far too mechanistic and materialistic to consider just how someone might get himself "healed" in the true and not the trendy sense of the word. And science? "Real scientists" don't talk about spiritual matters such as healing. But there *is* a spiritual life, and healing is a function of it. We just don't understand it very well, because even those of us who claim to be "religious" have separated the spiritual and the natural so far apart that we almost *cannot* consider them as simultaneous qualities of the same thing. But Jesus did.

And you can bet that Bartimaeus did, as well. And with a little practice, so can we.

Let's get to the issue at hand: the healing of Bartimaeus. Let's work through it, this time for the "feel" of the story. We will worry about the details later. Let's engage our imaginations first, and join this bustling crowd which is following Jesus on the road to Jerusalem. It is the Passover, granddaddy of holidays for the Jews--like our Easter, Christmas, and the Fourth of July rolled into one, week-long, continuous celebration. It is the hottest time of year--in Palestine, the hottest part of the world. Think of Arizona in August.. The road from Jericho, not very

likely paved, is just like any other dirt road in the hot, dry summer--a river of fine dust just waiting for a "great multitude" of feet to churn it up. Picture this motley crowd, hardly the nobility--dusty, sweating peasants for the most part; all caught up in the excitement of the moment. Quite an image..

Picture the people of Jericho, lining the road to catch a glimpse of this notorious, mysterious, and slightly dangerous man. Imagine these people - the shimmering heat - the flies - the dust - the noise - the confusion - the excitement! "Jesus of Nazareth is coming through town! Isn't he the new prophet who is doing all the miracles? He's the one who heals people, who brought Lazarus of Bethany back to life! Isn't he the one who talks with God? Here? In Jericho? Are you serious? Let's go see him!

As we shall see, there is a lot more in this story than just the single act of restoring the blind man's vision. In these seven short verses, we shall find the roots, *in reality, no less*, of some great mystical principles. And mystical principles are none other than Divine Truths. And Divine Truths are what Swedenborg called the doctrines for the New Church, The Church of the New Jerusalem.

This story is similar in style to most of the other miracle narratives in the Gospels. As journalists, the writers of the Gospels were failures! It seems that the bigger the event, the smaller the press coverage. Time and time again, the Gospel writers take momentous, cataclysmic events like this one, and report them in the shortest narrative possible. It is a curious habit of these writers--as if the miracles were simply accepted, without much comment--by the followers of Christ. Well, *they were*, and it is our distance from these events, both in time and spiritual sophistication, that makes them so extraordinary to us. The Gospel writers had the Good News to tell, and their story had an urgency to it, to get to "the good part," the crucifixion and the resurrection. The miracles? Of course, but let them speak for themselves; they didn't need embellishment. The writers of this story were not journalists. They were not historians, either. They had *been* there, and they told it the best way they knew how. And it is in the sparse description of such a major event that the power in it is best revealed. Seven verses.. to tell the story of the healing of blind Bartimaeus.

How do we approach this story? In some churches, to find the spiritual truth in the Scriptures means it is OK (or even necessary) to abandon

the literal sense of the story as truth. This can lead us to the intellectual approach, in which we eventually don't worry much about the story at all (especially any parts we might not like). In other churches, the literal story *is* the limit of the spiritual message, and interpretation is neither invited nor tolerated. We take what we can get from it, and we all go home. Either way, we lose one of the major elements of this miracle.

The New Church is different. It is not a compromise between these two extreme positions--there can be none, really. I would say that it is the best of both worlds: This church teaches the importance of the literal story (right down to its specific words) and its *essential* role in getting us to the spiritual. The Writings for the New Church unfold the internal, or spiritual sense of the Word. But you can't get there without the literal sense--the words--to guide the way. So in our church, a very real Bartimaeus got his very real blindness healed by an authentic Jesus of Nazareth, who happened to quite literally be the Lord, the Divine Human, God, on this very earth, in human form. So far so good..

And, we find in this church that this very real event was structured by God's Divine plan, called Providence, to represent a *load* of spiritual principles as well. This blindness was real *and* representational of spiritual blindness--and the details planted carefully in these seven verses, although actual, were caused to produce spiritual repercussions as well. What a system! Literal *and* representative. In this church we get both (*must have both*), for truth to come to us on both levels.

So after all this, we approach the story just as it unfolds. We take it on face value for the tremendous power of good it describes, and then we take it again, for the spiritual truths it can teach us. It is a simple story. We'll not stifle its message with a lot of theological camouflage. In the New Church, there is no need!

It was along the road on the outskirts of Jericho where Jesus encountered Bartimaeus. He and his disciples and the crowd which followed him everywhere were heading for Jerusalem for the great Passover festival. What a scene it must have been!

Bartimaeus was in the center of the action by default, really. He was just sitting there, as usual, in his customary spot, when the confusion of the procession overtook him. Imagine his apprehension, at first. "What is this great confusion? Am I safe? How will I get away if this is a riot, or the Romans?" It was then he heard from someone that Jesus of

Nazareth was the cause of the commotion. He must have been relieved. He had not been *seeking* this man all over the countryside, for healing, or any other thing. *But he knew him* (probably from his daily presence along the road, where news and gossip were plentiful among the travelers). He had already made up his mind about this prophet. We know this in two ways:

In an instant, Bartimaeus was yelling at the top of his lungs "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" He yelled until those around him told him to be quiet, "but he cried out all the more." He didn't have time to decide if Jesus was the one--this was his one and only chance at the man--had he hesitated to ponder the facts, the moment would have been lost. But Bartimaeus was ready. And what did he call Jesus? *Son of David*. The Scriptures called the Messiah by this name. Bartimaeus had done his homework--he *knew* this, and more importantly, he *believed* it. He was given a Providential shot at this Messiah, and he wasn't going to miss it. "Shut up, Bartimaeus, that is Jesus, don't disturb him." But he kept crying out until something happened. Here is a man who knew what he was doing.

And then, in this confusion--this great noise--Jesus did what he had done before. Hearing a single cry from within the din of voices, he stopped. Now the people who followed Jesus knew what this could mean. They had seen him do this before, and it usually meant something big was about to happen. Imagine the suspense. Jesus said, "call him," indicating the beggar. And when they told him he was to rise and meet Jesus face-to-face, he did just as you might suspect. He "*sprang up*," and went to meet him. And as he sprang up, Bartimaeus took his mantle (his loose coat) and threw it aside. Now Bartimaeus was dirt-poor. This was likely one of his only possessions, and very *necessary* in the hill country of the Judaeian desert, with hot days, but very cold nights.

His focus intense on the Son of David, the Messiah, Bartimaeus threw it away. This man was serious.

"And Jesus said to him, 'What do you want me to do for you?'" What a strange question! He knew, of course. But why did he ask it? Bartimaeus' answer was just as we have come to expect from this man, who didn't beat around the bush: "Master," he said, "let me receive my sight." Now I can't make up my mind about this answer of his. Is he asking Jesus to heal him? Not directly (and we have found Bartimaeus

to be a very direct-acting man). He wants to receive his sight. This implies that sight was his to have--already his--requiring only some word from the Son of David to validate it. Indeed it was, because Jesus treats it just this way. He didn't heal Bartimaeus. What does he say? "Go your way; your faith has made you well." Did Bartimaeus heal himself? And what is this faith business, anyway? The whole healing thing gets very hard to picture at this point. "Immediately," it says, "he received his sight and followed him on the way." We know he got his sight. We know he asked to receive it. And we know that Jesus mediated the event in some manner. But what we find from carefully reading this story is that the healing was not an *event* as such. It was the endpoint of a *process*, and the process had begun long before Jesus happened by that day. Every element of this story is part of the process, and each, in its own way is essential to it. To be well, we must understand them all. Not surprisingly, each represents the application of a major doctrinal point--Divine Truth, remember?--of our New Church. Let's look at them.

First, Bartimaeus was in the right place at the right time. He didn't push it--did not pursue Jesus. It was the work of Providence that he was there. But *remember*, it was also the work of Providence that he was blind in the first place. That's a hard teaching.. Here we find both sides of Providence, not in some dusty book, but at work in the world! Second, Bartimaeus had done his homework. When the Son of David appeared, unexpectedly, for only an instant, this man was ready. His mind was made up. He had considered the facts, and *knew* that this was the Messiah. When the moment came, he *seized* it, without rehearsal in that instant. This was a man of action, but acting from preparation. This is the way we are told that Works, or action, flow out of Faith. Faith is preparation, and *knowing what is true*. But until it acts, it just sits beside the road.

Third, Bartimaeus was *persistent*. This is the first thing we learn of him. "He cried out all the more" when the many rebuked him. He was going to cry out until the Son of David heard him and did something about it. This represents the *work* of our *regeneration*. We must persist in our daily work of removing evils and replacing them with good. We must do this blindly at times, from Faith that the Lord will hear us and lead us to our goal. And we must go about this work *relentlessly*.

Fourth, when his moment had arrived, he "sprang up" to meet the Messiah. But first he threw aside his mantle, signifying that all his needs were to be met in this man.

This kind of trust set the stage for what was to happen--what was indeed happening already. This is a lesson in Faith.

Fifth, in order to have his sight, Bartimaeus was compelled by the Lord to state this need, in plain language, out loud:

"What do you want me to do for you?," he said, remember? That's why he asked that curious question. It wasn't for him--it was for Bartimaeus. This is the first principle of prayer. The Lord would have us state our needs plainly, so that they can be transformed from their natural form to spiritual fulfillment.

And last, we come to the most powerful image in the whole story. What was the deal between these two for restoring the blind man's sight? What was the price of this healing? Nothing. "Go your way; your faith has made you well." Those were the terms. And which way did Bartimaeus go? Let's read it: "And immediately he received his sight and *followed him on the way*. He followed the Lord. *This* is the story. Freedom. Regeneration by the grace and mercy of the Lord, in *freedom*, according to *reason*. That is the New Church, and that is the message of this story.

The lesson from the literal sense of this story of Bartimaeus is enormous. We are told that there is also a spiritual sense to be perceived, and I think we have already sensed its presence. In closing, let's examine this spiritual lesson.

What happened to Bartimaeus? We know that "he received his sight." And we know, by intuition, that this also means that his spiritual eyes were opened. But what does this *really* mean?

He was told that his faith had made him well. Let's try that. *Well*, in this version of the Bible (NKJV), is *whole* in the King James Version (now, maybe we are getting somewhere). And this word in the original Greek was *sozos*, from the verb "to be made whole." Now I think we've got it! But "wholeness" can be a pretty fluffy concept, if we're not careful--the word is sure thrown around a lot these days, without doing much work. But this we know: Bartimaeus was made whole.. he got his sight. And Jesus was the broker of this transaction.

Now if we distill the message of the Gospels into its purest form, we find a single theme. Every time Jesus paused to teach the people, he talked

of nothing else. This was his message: You are a body and a spirit, *right now!* Your spirit will not appear later, it is with you (it is you) *right now!* Your spirit and you body don't know each other! Get them back together! Your spiritual self is an *eternal* being! You must do something with it *now* to get it started toward heaven! He tried to make people *want* to be spiritually alive, and he tried to show them how to be *whole*. But he wouldn't do it for them. He told them he was the Son of Man, the Divine Human; a living, breathing model of this spirit/body creature, and then he *proved* it.

But with all of this, very few believed. Those who did were healed, like Bartimaeus. It *had* to happen. Let me read you some wonderful fiction--words put into the mouth of Jesus by Nikos Kazantzakis, the author of *The Last Temptation of Christ*, a novel of great power which comes to terms with the *humanness* of Jesus:

the scene is on the road, much like the circumstances of our story today. His disciples are talking among themselves, and it says "But Jesus did not hear. He was watching in front, his eyes filled with the blind, the lame, and the leprous.. Ah, if I could only blow on every soul, he thought, and cry to it, Awake! Then, if it did awake, the body would become soul and be cured."

This, as Kazantzakis understood (as *every mystic since time began* has understood), is the secret. Healing, in this physical world, and spiritual healing, are two sides of the same coin. When people become whole, they attain the perfect total blending of material and spiritual, and as spiritual perfection proceeds, perfection of the material body follows suit. Christ *leads* us to wholeness--but he does not transform us, until we ask. Who healed Bartimaeus? By looking to the Divine Human, Bartimaeus saw the spiritual perfection that was *his* for the asking. So he believed and he looked. This *blind* man *looked* on the Lord and said "Master, let me receive my sight." Bartimaeus was primed. He got his sight.. and a whole lot more.

Who was this man on the road outside of Jericho? He was the Son of Man, and in the third chapter of the Book of John, we read:

No one has ascended to heaven but he who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up,

that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.
John 3: 13-15

Eternal life. *To teach* its existence has been called "The Great Task" for centuries.

To believe in it is our salvation, for when we do, we feel the urgency of getting these souls of ours in order. And *to see* it, we have only to look upon the Lord with the simple but powerful faith of the blind beggar, Bartimaeus. There is healing in it.

Amen

*The lessons: Numbers 21:4-9, Mark 10: 46-52, Apocalypse Explained
239:20-22*