

Speaking, Hearing, Seeing, Following

A sermon preached on Mark 10:46-52 & Psalm 34:1-8 on Sunday, October 27, 2024, by Olena Withrow with First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC

I.

I've been listening to the Barefoot Contessa Ina Garten's recently released memoir lately. I love an audiobook- especially when it is a memoir or autobiography. There is just something special about hearing someone tell their own story, even in a polished and published way. Ina Garten, a former Washington nuclear policy budget analyst turned gourmet food store owner, operator, cook and author makes meaning of her life through the title "Be Ready When the Luck Happens."¹ She recounts story after story of her now 76 years where she made a change or followed her gut, not always sure which breaks would be good or bad. She attributes at least some of this success to luck, things coming around by chance rather than one's own action. But recall the title isn't simply: "Luck has happened to me, hooray!" No. The title is "Be Ready When the Luck Happens." Even for those we perceive as the luckiest among us, it is so often true that they must be ready to respond when the moment calls for it. I wonder what it might mean in light of our scripture today to be ready for the calling of the present moment? Some might call it luck, some might call it coincidence, some might call it providence. For Bartimaeus, he may have just called it another day on the road in Palestine, but when he heard Jesus he was ready to act, not letting a moment to speak face to face with the living God pass him by.

Before we go too much further, let's pray:

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord our rock and our redeemer. Amen

¹ Garten, *Be Ready When the Luck Happens*

II.

Let's back up and set the scene a little. We find ourselves today in the midst of Mark's Gospel, Jesus and his disciples are leaving Jericho and headed up to Jerusalem, right on the precipice of change. In the Gospel narrative just a few verses earlier Jesus has just predicted his death and resurrection for the third time and I can imagine the disciples being aghast, saying, "Jesus we've just kind of got a good thing going- why exactly would we go to the place that you think you're going to be killed?" This pace of change seems to cloud their vision of the way they desire to walk even with Jesus as their guide right by their side.

After this third ominous prediction we hear a request from James and John. Jesus says these now familiar words, "What do you want me to do for you?" "Let us sit at your right and left in your glory," the disciples say. "You do not know what you are asking," replies Jesus. These faithful friends, who have been by Jesus's side for so long now, were still not getting it. Indeed Jesus has laid out the path ahead three times now, yet they couldn't comprehend what it would mean to drink the cup Jesus would drink. This is indeed a central theme in this section of Mark's Gospel. What does it mean to *see*? Who is able to see the Way and why? It wasn't the rich man, he couldn't give up his things. Time and again Jesus explains, and the disciples who have been with him all this way still don't understand what it means to *see*, and follow Jesus fully.

I'm not sure how each of you feel but I think I can understand being at max capacity for change and having my vision a little cloudy on what in the world the path forward is. I can imagine we have each found ourselves at times overwhelmed at the pace of change we have experienced in our lives, perhaps especially in even just the last five years. Pandemics, elections, wars, grocery shopping, kids starting school, kids finishing school, new homes and jobs, new friends become family. Even the good change can be cause for a disorientation so profound we miss the path right in front of us.

This story of Bartimaeus is the culmination of the healing stories in Mark's gospel. This section that began with the healing of a blind man culminates in a blind man seeing the way clearest of all. Mark's gospel typically leaves no room for processing the pace of change. Famously *impatient* with the details we hear over and over this word "immediately" "immediately" "immediately." and yet when Jesus hears the call of Bartimaeus, He stops in his tracks. He stands still as the gospel writer tells us. We hear even amidst the breakneck pace of this Gospel the space created for the messiah to hear the call of a man society has tried to keep quiet. What might we have to learn?

III.

They came to Jericho, the text says, and as he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving, Bartimaeus heard that it was Jesus. Not worrying about disrupting those around, Bartimaeus began to shout and call saying "Jesus, Son of David, Have Mercy on me!" This title "Son of David" is charged with political messianic implications.² This blind outsider hears through the hubbub of the crowd and doesn't hesitate to call out to the Son of David, the Son of God. Many in the crowd began shushing him. We can see this clearly right? "Shhhhhhh- don't you know who that is? Don't make a fool of yourself!" Such secondhand embarrassment rising to the surface with a flash, it seems, for those around him. Yet, Bartimaeus calls out again. In fact he raises his voice even louder. "Son of David, have mercy on me!" Jesus stood still. Making space for the disruptor's voice to be heard not simply on the fringes but right at the heart of the journey, Jesus calls Baritmaeus to him and springing to his feet, hastily leaving his possessions and cloak behind, unlike that rich man earlier in the story, he makes his way to Jesus. And here again echoes the familiar question, "What do you want me to do for you?"

²<https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2018/10/23/your-faith-has-made-you-well-salts-lecti-onary-commentary-for-twenty-third-week-after-pentecost>

In her 1977 Essay “Beloved Image”, Nelle Morton, A Feminist Theologian, Activist and Professor, wrote about the concept of “Hearing to Speech.”³ Morton tells a story of her first such encounter with this new understanding:

It was in a small group of women who had come together to tell our own stories that I first received a totally new understanding of hearing and speaking. I remember well how one woman started, hesitating and awkward, trying to put the pieces of her life together. Finally she said: “I hurt... I hurt all over.” She touched herself in various places as if feeling for the hurt before she added, “but... I don’t know where to begin to cry.” She talked on and on. Her story took on fantastic coherence. When she reached a point of most excruciating pain no one moved. No one interrupted. Finally she finished. After a silence, she looked from one woman to another. “You heard me. You heard me all the way.” Her eyes narrowed. She looked directly at each woman in turn and then said slowly: “I have a strange feeling you heard me before I started. You heard me to my own story.”⁴

Though short stories in the gospel narrative, we see such an example of this phenomenon here. Jesus does not assume Bartimaeus’s desires, nor did he lead James and John in with a question that already revealed what the Christ might think they should ask for? Even in these short vignettes - Jesus models this hearing to speech. “Hearing of this sort” Morton Says, “is equivalent to empowerment. We empower the disinherited, the outsider, [one another] as we are able to hear them name in their own way their own oppression and suffering.”⁵ Morton concludes that this practice can become like “A great ear at the heart of the universe –at the heart of our common life—hearing human beings to speech—and being heard to our own speech.”⁶

“What do you want me to do for you?” “My teacher, let me see again.”

We can hear the echos of the psalmist’s great poetry dripping with theology “I sought the LORD, and he answered me.” “This poor soul cried and was heard by the

³ <https://michaelanthonyhoward.com/blog/2017/07/23/nelle-morton-hearing-to-speech>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

LORD.” Jesus empowered Bartimaeus. Viewed as an audacious disruptor by those who wished him to stay silent, We see this act of divine grace evoking and encouraging the human voice, creating space for Bartimaeus to be heard and indeed for all of us to be heard by God and one another.⁷ In the midst of the crowd we can imagine the lesson being taught by this example. We’ve seen it before and we’ve heard it again this morning that God hears the cries of all calling out for justice, for sight, for inclusion on the way. God stops in God’s tracks to be with those speaking to God. God hears each of us into speech and in turn models for us how to do so for others. Creating space for each one of us to speak and hear, to disrupt and to be disrupted. I wonder how the crowd responded when the divine listened to the beggar and the blind man regained his sight. Did they understand that he had already seen the way more clearly than they had?

IV.

And so after Bartimaeus had courageously named what he needed Jesus said to him, “Go; your faith has made you well.” Gosh this can be painful for some of us to hear. For some of us I know we feel the sting of other’s healing when we ourselves wish to be healed, from sickness and injury, hurt and harm for ourselves, for our neighbors, for our planet, for our society. We cry out to God saying me too God, I would like to be made well! *Son of David, Have Mercy on Me Also!*

Kate Bowler, a Historian at Duke Divinity down the road and a Cancer survivor articulates these feelings so well in her work. She often writes blessings, and in one such blessing which she names *a blessing for when there is no cure for being human* she says this:

God, how we yearn for the completion of all things.
and we try, oh how we try to hurry it along
with our self-help elixirs,
slurries with a touch of truth and a handful of goodness, enough to be effective, for
awhile.

⁷ Michael Lodahl in *Mark*, Feasting on the Gospels, p. 334

The gospel of hustle, or of positivity, or peloton
But then life happens and we realize all over again that we are human, frail and finite,
and that there's no cure for that, despite illusory promises that say otherwise.
this is where we live, in this reality.
Come help us in our humanity. help us enjoy all the beauty that is here, the sweetness that comes to us unbidden. The light that gives us eyes to see.⁸

Bartimaeus encounters the light that gives us eyes to see. Perhaps even before his sight was physically restored. In his audacious faith, In hearing and speaking, He is made well. He is not magically immune to the reality of life, but He is able to see the path, to follow in the way, even as the way leads toward the cross.

The physical spiritual healing of Bartimaeus is not some act of Jesus in the way we might expect biblical miracles of this sort, no spitting in the mud or scales falling off here. Instead Jesus himself attributes Bartimaeus's sight to his own faith. His faith that required he not stay silent when he knew the messiah was near. His faith that required he respond in the midst of those who would keep him disempowered. This story of Bartimaeus includes a physical healing of restoring sight to a blind man but I feel compelled that we would be doing the good news an injustice if we left it at that. If we can linger here a moment longer we must confess that we know the point to this story is not simply *if* we see, whether we have vision or not, but how we see that constitutes the healing our faith has potential for. This restorative power of God is not simply a "down from without" healing of ailments for this moment but an "up from within" bold and humble courage to speak and be heard, to have clear eyes about what might lie ahead and still follow on the way.⁹

V.

Wake Forest University School of Divinity celebrated its 25th anniversary this past week. A joyous occasion bolstering with hope and ideas, with a theme of

⁸<https://katebowler.com/blessings/a-blessing-for-when-theres-no-cure-for-being-human/>

⁹<https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2018/10/23/your-faith-has-made-you-well-salts-lectinary-commentary-for-twenty-third-week-after-pentecost>

“Faith for Tomorrow.” Our weekly chapel service, always Tuesday’s 11:00 am, was a bit more grand for the occasion and our good friend Dr. Bill Leonard proclaimed the good news. As I was mulling over this story of speaking and hearing and seeing and following, I was struck by Dr. Leonard’s turn of phrase when he said emphatically, “The church is always responding and we need to do so right now.”¹⁰ How can we talk about speaking and hearing and seeing and following in the way of Jesus, the way of truth and love and justice and life, without being willing to respond right now? To follow on the way is to live our life of discipleship, to live our *Life Together*. But we must speak and hear and see what is happening now. As we hear the story of Bartimaeus and indeed the good news of the gospel it is a story of a present Jesus in the present journey on the way - may we not let ourselves ease into the past or the future for fear of what we might hear, see, or be compelled to say in the now. The Church is always responding, but how?

Sitting around the table in the Commons, some of us here last week gave words to our feelings of hope, anticipation, excitement, or dread with all that is happening in our world right now. How it felt to go vote, what it looked like in Asheville this week, how friends spread out across the globe are doing and how we ourselves are doing. There is something clarifying to our responses when we can hear others hoping too. But of course it is not enough just to hope, as in to wish for something to come to pass without being willing to act. But it is a necessary component, this clear eyed Hope. Wise poet Wendell Berry contends such hope is what gives way to our responding and action for today, our speaking, hearing, seeing and following, and combats the despair that we may feel all too intimately knocking at our door. Describing such pragmatic hope Berry offers this encouragement:

¹⁰ Bill Leonard, “Improvising Grace: Reformation and Dissent” at Wake Forest University School of Divinity, October 22, 2024.

You've got to live, and if you attach yourself to people in this world – you marry, you have children, you have neighbors – if you are not careful, you'll get so that you *love* these people. I mean, *really love them*, to the extent that you'll work for them, that you'll exert yourself, that you'll be ashamed of yourself if you don't do justice to them. That's hard. It's a predicament, and it's a practical predicament. And if you're in a predicament, if there's anything to do at all, you *stir*. You get up and go about your work.¹¹

The church is always responding, the good news stirs within us good work. This good work is rooted in love and motivated by clear-eyed hope, perhaps the most difficult kind. This is the way we learn to follow, seeing ever clearer how we might need to speak and hear.

Bartimaeus and Jesus show us a way of speaking that is not one of speaking over others or assuming we know what they need but confidently and faithfully disrupting the crowd when we need to do so. Bartimaeus and Jesus show us a way of hearing, of hearing God when God comes into the room and of hearing others all the way into their own speech, making space for their stories that surely have much to teach us. Bartimaeus and Jesus show us a way of seeing, that is not concerned with seeing the riches or glory we might gain but simply seeing clearly again amidst the chaos of any crowd we might find ourselves in. And Bartimaeus and Jesus show us a way of following, immediately when we see the way choosing to journey on it. We hear the call of responding to the faith springing up within us overflowing to make us well by naming the important stories of our lives out loud to God and to one another. Is this not our tradition of witness?

And so I ask you my dear friends. How is the church speaking? How is the

¹¹ Michael Lamb, *Difficult Hope: Wendell Berry and Climate Change*

church hearing? Are we blind or can we see? Are we following the way? With hope we go about our work, may the spirit guide us. Amen.