

Sometimes blindness has nothing to do with your eyes. The thing that I will always associate with the story of Bartimaeus is the testimony of a woman that Michele and I worked with in Guatemala. She and her husband had started an orphanage in a little village called San Jacinto, not too far from the border with El Salvador. Her story was that she had been blind, but not in the sense that she could not see, but rather that she did not see something. That something was the children of Guatemala City who were living in the city dump. It's easy to be blind to them, they're invisible to most of the world, or so it seems. But she did see them, and at almost the same time she happened to read this story about Bartimaeus, at first she thought that maybe the kids were the ones crying out for someone to help them, but then she realized that she was the one crying out. Her eyes were painfully opened, and her heart broke for these little children who had nothing and no one.

What follows is perhaps a story that is untold by the Scripture: what does Bartimaeus do after he follows Jesus? What does his witness bring to the world? How does his sight contribute to the Kingdom of God? For Carla and Jim, their ability to see these invisible little ones, cost them everything, and gave them everything. They put everything they owned into rescuing these children, first one, then several, and they were perpetually building and growing so that they could do more, when we were there they were up to about thirty, kids ranging from toddlers to teenagers, to young adults that were taking their first steps out into the world. And it all started with Bartimaeus, because their eyes were opened and they immediately followed Jesus on the way.

You may never know what it's like to actually be blind and receive your sight, but you can all know what it means to have your eyes opened. The story of Bartimaeus contains several important lessons that will confront everyone who has an experience like this, and the first thing is that some people are going to be offended, or at least confounded by your experience. Bartimaeus initiates this encounter by breaching etiquette; beggars are not supposed to make claims on those passing by, they are supposed to wait, humbly and gratefully for the alms to drop to them. "Many" ordered him to be quiet, that's not how this is done, but Jesus calls him to come near. If you're surprised that Jesus would do that, you haven't been paying attention.

Bartimaeus throws off his cloak and came to Jesus. Keep in mind that his cloak may be the only thing he really owns, and most people of ordinary means only had one. He leaves that behind in an instant and without hesitation, unlike the rich man who could not leave his possessions behind. Bartimaeus is instantly ready to follow Jesus, and he does so with no reservations. It is crucial for us to recognize that following Jesus is both challenging, and honestly the best and only thing we ought to be doing. The Gospels often show us that the ones who follow Jesus most enthusiastically are the ones who recognize that whatever they had before was nothing in comparison to what they have in Jesus. Like Amazing Grace says, "I once was lost, but now I'm found, was blind but now I see," the comparison of the two conditions is not really much of a choice.

The question remains though: what do you do once you see? I see this story as a launching point. Bartimaeus is a man who stands in the exact spot where we all stand: healed, eyes open and looking at Jesus. His advantage is that he knows that everything that he is and everything that he will be is because of his connection with Jesus. What those who have had their eyes opened do in response is not one size fits all. Not everyone goes and starts an orphanage in Guatemala, not everyone writes "Amazing Grace," but a couple people do and that is how the Kingdom of God works.

Some of the most disastrous forms of church have been the ones that assumed that everyone with open eyes would see the same thing, and follow the same way. Think back about the way that Bartimaeus had his eyes opened: he broke the conventions, he didn't sit quietly and wait for someone to take pity on him, he loudly cried out for mercy. The "many" who tried to silence him, were probably some of the religious people, and maybe even some of Jesus Disciples, who saw his disruption as offensive or at least in poor form. Jesus meets many people on the road, he heals many people on the road, this theme of their faith making them well, is an important part.

Our friends in Guatemala, for instance, they were people who had their share of problems, and they weren't necessarily saints, but they had faith that what their eyes saw their hearts could not ignore, and that faith then helped them continuously move forward along the way, raising money, building things, navigating a really broken government bureaucracy, whatever it was their faith kept them going. The healing continued long after their eyes were opened, but it's basis was always the same: faith.

Faith is the spiritual equivalent of having eyes to see. Without faith the world is a dark place indeed, without faith you will always be held back by the "way things are." Without faith you will not see, indeed you may choose not to see, the last and the least and the meek and the little ones. With faith your eyes are open and it's time to follow Jesus.