“He Threw It Off” November 14, 2021

Mark 10:46-52 Westminster, Greenville

25th Sunday after Pentecost Ben Dorr

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I’ve got a word that I would like everyone to think about this morning.

The word is pentimento.

Do you know that word?

Pentimento is a word from the world of art.

It’s when an artist has put a base color on a canvass, or perhaps has already painted a picture, and then she changes her mind, and decides there will be a different base color, or a slightly different picture…but after the painting is done, over the course of time, that original base color or original picture manages to bleed its way through to the surface.

So while you see what’s on the surface, you can also see what’s behind, what’s beneath the surface of the painting.

It’s called pentimento…[[1]](#footnote-1)

Now I don’t think it’s a word that ought to be limited to the world of art.

It happens in the Bible,

when we hear a story about one thing,

but underneath the story there’s another layer,

and the more you look at the top layer of the story,

the more that UNDERNEATH layer starts to bleed through…

A perfect example is our text from Mark for today.

Today’s story is most definitely pentimento.

Why?

Because what’s on the surface is just another healing story, Jesus gives a blind beggar his sight.

Do you remember this person’s name, who Jesus heals?

Bartimaeus.

Did you know that out of all the people in Mark’s Gospel whom Jesus heals, Bartimaeus is the only one whose name we know?

By my count, there were at least 12 other healing stories prior to this one—Simon Peter’s mother-in-law, Jairus’ daughter, the paralytic who was lifted through a roof to get to Jesus—over and over and over again, Jesus heals, but we don’t know the name of Jairus’ daughter, we don’t know the name of Peter’s mother-in-law.

Today, this story—it’s the ONLY time Mark tells us the person’s name.

Bartimaeus.

What’s curious is that we’re not just told his name once.

We’re told TWICE!

Bartimaeus son of Timaeus is what Mark writes, which makes you think that his dad was Timaeus, and Timaeus’s son is Bartimaeus, all of which may be true, but it’s an odd thing to write, because Mark is repeating himself with that phrase.

Completely redundant with that phrase.

You see, “bar” is the Aramaic word for “son”.

To say that the blind man’s name was Bartimaeus is to say his name was “son of Timaeus”.

So…when Mark writes, “Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus,” it’s like saying, “Son of Timaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside…”

I think Mark wants us to pay attention to this person’s name![[2]](#footnote-2)

I think all that is a clue that we’re into some pentimento with this story…there’s something important about this particular healing story which appears right before Jesus enters Jerusalem, right before the last week of Jesus’s life—there’s something that Mark wants us to see in this story that’s not on the surface.

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What do you think that something might be?

Bartimaeus…son of Timaeus…

If you Google the name Timaeus—you’ll discover that Timaeus is also the name of one of Plato’s dialogues.

According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy:

“In the Timaeus Plato presents an elaborate…account of the formation of the universe and an explanation of its impressive order and beauty.

The beautiful orderliness of the universe is not only the manifestation of [divine] Intellect; it is also the model for rational souls to understand and to emulate. Such understanding and emulation restores those souls to their original state of excellence, a state that was lost in their embodiment.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

What does all that mean?

It means that Plato’s *Timaeus* presents a way of SEEING this world.  It explains not just how the world was created, but WHY…the goal, the purpose for the existence of human life.

According to Plato, the goal is that restoration of the original state of excellence of the soul, which—in Plato’s imagination,

is the thinking life,

the life that seeks wisdom,

the life of the philosopher…

That’s the goal of human life, and wouldn’t you know it, Plato just happens to be a philosopher!

In Plato’s world, the one who practices philosophy and THINKS the right way about what is going on in the world is the one who is closest to the divine.

They’re at the top of the ladder.

They’ve achieved what life is all about.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Why does all this matter?

Because…who’s blind in this story?

Not a trick question.

Bartimeaus. Bar-timeaus. The son of Timeaus. In other words, the sons, the descendants of Plato, those who believed that life was about THINKING the right way.

When Jesus said that life is about LOVING the right way.

Before today’s text, Jesus tells his disciples:

“…whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.”

And right after today’s text, Jesus heads to Jerusalem, to the cross.

Jesus said that Plato had it backwards.

Life is not about going UP. It’s about going DOWN.

Of course, our society may not be living according to the *Timaeus*.

But we certainly have our own version of “thinking the right way”:

Our society says that those who make the most money,

those who have the most followers on Twitter,

those whose bank accounts let them retire and do whatever they want to do…they find themselves on the top rung.

But Jesus said—if you want to get close to God, go to the bottom rung.

You can’t ACHIEVE your way there.

But you can serve your way there.

Commit your life to loving those people who are down,

who are out,

who are forgotten…

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Samuel James is a “world-touring musician,”

a well-known, blues-playing guitarist

who had a difficult childhood.

He “lost his mother at age 12 and spent his teens in foster homes…”

When he describes those adolescent years, he says:

“I learned the magic number was five. If you get to five foster homes, you’re marked. You’re trouble….then you go into shelters. You can only stay in a shelter for thirty days, and then you’re on to the next, and on to the next. This is affectionately called the ‘shelter shuffle.’”

Somehow, Samuel James made it past FIVE, into his seventh foster home, and it wasn’t going well.

“But on the bus to school, there was this cute little brunette named Jenny, sitting by herself, nose in a book. And that was usually what I would do. So one day I asked her if she wanted to be loners together.

“She laughed….[and soon]

I’m talking to her on the bus every day,

and pretty soon we’re talking every night on the phone.”

But back in his foster home, things go from bad to worse.

So Samuel James goes back to a shelter, and he calls Jenny.

“I don’t tell her where I am, because…I move so much, I’ve lost every friend I’ve ever had, including her. She just doesn’t know it yet. As long as I can keep her on the phone, she won’t [know].

“But eventually, it slips out.

And I can’t remember what she said.

I just remember getting empty again and hanging up.

“I wait [until] the next week to call her, and almost immediately she hands the phone to her father. Now, at this point I’ve had a lot of conversations in my life about ‘Don’t call the house again,’

‘Don’t come by here,’

‘You’re a bad influence.’

“But that’s not the conversation I have.”

“What he [Jenny’s father] says to me is, ‘Would you like to come live with us?’”[[5]](#footnote-5)

**Would you like to come live with us?**

It was a commitment—that would change the life of Samuel James forever.

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That’s what is underneath the surface in this text: commitment.

The nature and character of commitment.

This text asks us: what is it that we are committing our lives to?

You know why I love the story of Bartimaeus?

Not only because Mark names him, and not only because he’s son of Timaeus, suggesting that Plato was blind to the true purpose of life…Bartimaeus is unique because he’s the only person in Mark’s Gospel who gets healed by Jesus…and then FOLLOWS Jesus.

In other words, he’s the only one who makes a commitment.

And what’s remarkable is that he makes this commitment BEFORE he gets healed. Do you remember what Bartimaeus does when he hears that Jesus is calling ***him***?

He throws off his cloak!

It’s a SIGNIFICANT decision…

As the late biblical scholar, William Placher, writes:

“A cloak might have been a beggar’s only possession, and a blind man who tosses something aside in a crowd may never find it again. He [Bartimaeus] is doing what the rich man could not bring himself to do—casting aside everything he possesses to come to Jesus.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

Do you see what’s bleeding through to the surface in this story?

**The nature and character of commitment.**

What does it mean to make a commitment?

It’s an appropriate question to ask, on this Commitment Sunday.

I’ll never forget the Presbytery meeting I was at, years ago, when one of the older pastors stood up to speak. I don’t remember what the topic was, but he wanted to make sure that the Presbytery had a good idea of what it was about to embark on, if it approved the motion that was before the body.

And to illustrate his point, he told the story of the chicken and the pig.

Once upon a time, there was a chicken and a pig.

They were out for a walk together, and after a while, they both started getting hungry.

So they tried find a restaurant that would work for both of them. They ran across a place that the chicken thought sounded pretty good.

There was a sign out front.

The sign read: Blue Plate Special! Eggs and ham for lunch!

The chicken said to the pig: “This sounds delicious. Let’s go in!”

The pig responded, “Easy for you to say. They’re just asking you for a contribution. They’re asking ME for a commitment!”

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What does it mean to make a commitment?

Y’all made one earlier in worship, when you promised to help raise Sawyer in the Christian faith. It’s one of the most beautiful commitments any church can make.

And you’ll get another chance to make one in a few minutes.

When you bring your pledge card forward later in this service, what you carry in your hand is a promise to give a certain amount of money to Westminster in the coming year, yes.

But may I suggest that pledge card represents more than your finances?

Behind that pledge card is your faith.

Behind that pledge card is your base color.

Behind that pledge card is your love for Jesus Christ, for this church, and Christ’s love for you. Christ’s commitment to you.

Christ’s promise to shape and mold this community of faith to look more and more like himself…to be the body of Christ for everyone in this room and everyone outside this room.

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Shortly after Craig Barnes became the President at Princeton Seminary, he received an email from the pastor of the first church he ever served. He had left that congregation 20 years earlier. But the pastor wanted Dr. Barnes to know that Scott was in his second year of seminary at Princeton.

You see, Scott was just a boy when Barnes knew him 20 years earlier. At that time, he went by “Scottie”.

Barnes writes:

“Scottie was a five-year-old cherished son of that church. I remember him bouncing around Sunday school with his older brother and twirling on his father’s hand while being led through the church parking lot.”

“Over the years [however]…it became clear that something was amiss with the mother of this family.

“…we began to see her husband and the boys

in worship without her.

“When she did come she was disheveled and inattentive.”

One day the father went to see Barnes, and described his wife’s alcoholism that was destroying everything. Soon after that meeting, in fact, the father received a phone call at work from the police, telling him that his wife had almost burned the house down.

It just so happened that about that time, Barnes received a call to become pastor at another church. So he lost touch with the family—until he got that email about Scottie—now Scott—who was a student at Princeton.

The two got together, and Scott brought Barnes up to speed on the previous 20 years. How his father lost his job and the house, how his mother drank herself into “an almost vegetative state” and ended up in a nursing home.

And Barnes also learned about his former church.

* + How the congregation “rallied to offer babysitting, covered dishes…and prayers.”
  + How Scott and his brother “were given star roles in the Christmas pageants” and “found their best friends in the youth group and went on mission trips.”

Barnes writes:

“Everyone knew the family’s problems but there was never a word of judgment or even pity. They were just being the church…

“When I asked Scott about his sense of call [to ministry], he said it was pretty simple—he’s never been able to get over the love of a congregation that kept showing up at his door…when there was only heartache on the other side…”

They kept showing up year after year after year.

“Now,” Scott said, “it’s my turn.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

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Do you remember the word that I mentioned at the very beginning of this sermon?

Pentimento.

Pentimento is a word from the world of art.

But it doesn’t just belong to the world of art.

And it doesn’t just belong to stories in the Bible.

It belongs with you.

Because…

when I see each of you making sacrifices to love people outside these walls,

when I see you going out of your way to stand by and walk with people who are hurting inside these walls,

when I see you making your pledge today,

I see people who are saying, “It’s my turn.”

Today, when you come forward, it’s pentimento—

your base color, your love for Christ and his love for you—

it’s going to shine through.

Amen.

1. I am indebted to a lecture by Dr. Fred Craddock for learning about pentimento. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I am indebted to a sermon preached by Dr. Tom Are at a conference at Mo Ranch, TX in 2015 for calling my attention to the significance of Bartimaeus’ name. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. [Plato’s Timaeus (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)](https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato-timaeus/) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I am indebted to Tom Are’s sermon at the 2015 Mo Ranch conference for some of the content here about Plato. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. As told on The Moth podcast, [The Moth | Stories | Jenny](https://themoth.org/stories/jenny). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. William Placher, *Mark*, Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. “The Rest of the Story,” by M. Craig Barnes, in *The Christian Century*, April 16, 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)