

New Vision
Mark 10:46-52
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Scott D. Anderson

Earlier this month I saw the new documentary called *Leap of Faith*. It's directed by Nicholas Ma, who also directed the documentary about Rev. Fred Rogers "Won't You Be my Neighbor?"

In this film, twelve diverse Christian leaders across the theological, political, racial, socioeconomic, gender, and sexuality spectrum make a commitment to participate in a series of boundary-breaking retreats in Grand Rapids, Michigan throughout the year 2022.

They were motivated by the palpable polarization which has taken over our country along with so much of institutional Christianity. Is it possible to heal these wounds? Is it possible to still belong to one another in such a divided world? To quote Fred Rogers, these 12 pastors sought to answer the question "Won't you be my neighbor?"

Led by a Mennonite pastor who was a trained facilitator in conflict resolution, the five women and seven men participating in these retreats begin having difficult conversations and facing painful realities around some of today's most contentious issues. The simplicity of "love one another" is sorely tested in this film as divisions become apparent, relationships strained by theological positions and long-held beliefs. Over the year, the group of pastors — conservative and progressive, men and women, gay and straight, Black, white, and Asian American — gathered to see if they could disagree and still stay together.

At one point, the pastors gather in the center of a room and answer a series of questions. Those who answer "Yes" go to one side, while the "No's" go to the other. The questions start out lightheartedly. In that process we learned that the Rev. Molly Bosscher, an Episcopal priest, is the only person in the group to have memorized the names of the books of the Bible in order.

Then the questions get more serious. When asked if they would officiate at a same-sex marriage, the group is split in half.

The discussions that follow reveal the enormous pain that theological divides cause. The Rev. Joan VanDessel, a married lesbian United Methodist minister, says she hoped the growing friendships would change her fellow pastors' minds about the topic. When that did not happen, there was a sense of betrayal.

"The response to that was a lot more painful than I expected," VanDessel tells the group. That leads to a discussion about the human cost of the divide on that issue and how they don't want that disagreement to tear them apart.

A key part of the conversation throughout the movie was around vulnerability and accepting differences.

"Why can't we be who we are and that to be OK for the next person?" asks James Stokes, pastor of New Life Tabernacle Church of God, at one point. "Why do we try to make everybody believe and feel the same way?" Another pastor chimed in, "Maybe we are a part of the problem."

Leap of Faith doesn't, somewhat surprisingly, so much advocate as hold space, which is missing in our country today. Hold space for honesty and vulnerability. Hold space for trust to develop. Hold space with the expectation that no one will change your mind, but rather allow relationships to deepen to the point of being able to say, "I can disagree with you and still love you."

Over the course of the year, the pastors formed a sense of belonging that was stronger than their differences and wanted to build a Christian community that made room for all of them. It was a profoundly moving experience to watch.

Perhaps in the course of your own life you have had a similarly profound, transformative experience where you have seen the world with new eyes, gained new vision. Perhaps it was a trip to a distant country. Perhaps it was a relationship with a stranger. Perhaps it happened in school, or at work, through tragedy, or some unexpected twist or turn on your life's journey. Bartimaeus, the blind man healed by Jesus in our text today, had an experience of seeing his world with new vision, and he teaches all of us how it can happen.

“And Jesus was leaving Jericho with his disciples and a great multitude. Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. And when Bartimaeus heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out and say, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.” And many in the crowd rebuked him, telling him to be silent. But he cried all the more, “Son of David, have mercy on me.”

There are several things that interest me about this story. First, the odd action of “many in the crowd.” The text literally says, “they told him to hold his tongue.” They want this beggar silenced. The crowd's efforts to silence the blind beggar reflects its wish to keep him a beggar—dependent and blind. If the man were healed, if he were to shake off his powerlessness, he would begin to demand food and health care. Eventually he would enter the job market and perhaps even reclaim the patrimony that he had lost. The blind beggar's silence, on the other hand, would ensure that the status quo would be maintained.

Then there is Bartimaeus himself. “He cried out.” He turns out to know more and trust more and asks more than the people expected from a blind beggar. He addresses Jesus with the title “Son of David.” He knows, more than anyone, that this is Messiah time...the time when the blind see, and the poor have their debts cancelled and beggars become citizens again. Who would have thought that a blind beggar would know it was this time?

He also dares to issue an imperative. He asks that the healing power Jesus be given to the one who has no claim on it except the courage to cry out. The blind beggar names and entreats Jesus. The people rebuke him, but he asks again. He gains his voice from his hope that Jesus is the Messiah. He had waited long enough for the promises which God had made even to blind beggars. God now needs to be enjoined to keep those promises.

The people do not want to concede that it is the time for fulfillment. They have an interest in postponing that time, because it would mean sharing power with beggars and being surrounded by more people who speak out and make claims.

The beggar does not speak in vain. Jesus says, “What do you want me to do? Bartimaeus' response to Jesus is terse and unambiguous: ‘I want my sight back. I want to be whole. I want access to public life. If I get my eyes, I will quit this begging. I want my dependency to end. I am entitled to more than this.’

Jesus' response is quick and simple. “Go, your faith has cured you.” His faith had done it. His faith is an act of hope which refuses to settle for the status quo. As the book of Hebrews reminds us; “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen (Heb. 11:1). The blind man's only resource was things hoped for, things not seen, and such faith gave him sight. And, in asserting his faith, he violates all the conventions required of being a blind beggar and steps out of his assigned role in life. Theologian Walter Bruggemann sums the

process by which Bartimeus begins to see with new vision: “Faith is the courage to speak, to announce for oneself a new possibility.”¹

Bartimaeus found that kind of courage in speaking out, in claiming for himself the healing power of Jesus. “Your faith has made you well,” Jesus said to him.

The twelve pastors who met in Grand Rapids over the course of a year, found that kind of faith, that new vision for themselves. *Leap of Faith* holds space for the fullness of our humanity and our desire for a better way of living it. Avoiding trite slogans and easy solutions, *Leap of Faith* is exactly that - a leap of faith, a calling of sorts into choosing to love not just via some artsy t-shirt but having the courage to speak, to announce for oneself a new possibility by wrestling openly with the conflicts of our day, taking off the masks, choosing to be present, trusting enough to be vulnerable, and willing to be transformed.

In these final days of the Presidential election season, with all of the tensions and anxiety that our differences are manifesting, I long for our country to take a similar leap of faith. That seems like such a distant possibility right now. But 12 pastors in Grand Rapids proved it is possible. Maybe it’s now up to each of us to help make it happen.

Amen.

¹ See Walter Brueggemann, “Theological Education: Healing the Blind Beggar,” *The Christian Century*, Feb. 5-12, 1986, pgs. 114-116.