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Faith to Change Things October 28th, 2012

Psalm 34:1-8 I will bless the LORD at all times; his praise will always be in my mouth.² I will praise the LORD— let the suffering listen and rejoice.³ Magnify the LORD with me! Together let us lift his name up high!⁴ I sought the LORD and he answered me. He delivered me from all my fears.⁵ Those who look to God will shine; their faces are never ashamed.⁶ This suffering person cried out: the LORD listened and saved him from every trouble.⁷ On every side, the LORD's messenger protects those who honor God; and he delivers them.⁸ Taste and see how good the LORD is! The one who takes refuge in him is truly happy!

Mark 10:46-52

⁴⁶ Jesus and his followers came into Jericho. As Jesus was leaving Jericho, together with his disciples and a sizable crowd, a blind beggar named Bartimaeus, Timaeus' son, was sitting beside the road. ⁴⁷ When he heard that Jesus of Nazareth was there, he began to shout, "Jesus, Son of David, show me mercy!" ⁴⁸ Many scolded him, telling him to be quiet, but he shouted even louder, "Son of David, show me mercy!" ⁴⁹ Jesus stopped and said, "Call him forward." They called the blind man, "Be encouraged! Get up! He's calling you." ⁵⁰ Throwing his coat to the side, he jumped up and came to Jesus. ⁵¹ Jesus asked him, "What do you want me to do for you?" The blind man said, "Teacher, I want to see." ⁵² Jesus said, "Go, your faith has healed you." At once he was able to see, and he began to follow Jesus on the way.

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Dream with me for a moment this morning. --What would you do if you knew that you couldn't fail? What thing are you dreaming about in the secret parts of your mind that you would you risk trying if you knew that it would work? Would you attempt some sort of a ministry for others? Would it be a business venture or a personal relationship action? Would you risk negative comments and putting up with people telling you that what you are trying to do will never work? What is it that you would do if you knew that it would be impossible to fail?

While we don't know what Bartimeaus was thinking here in this passage from Mark, we do know what he did. We can imagine the scene. Jesus and a group of his disciples had just spent some time in the ancient city of Jericho and were now leaving. Following them were a crowd of folks who had heard Jesus preach and do miracles in Jericho and who were now wondering what else would happen. No doubt there were some in the crowd who were just on the edge of belief. No doubt in the crowd there were others who were just curious. And of course, there are always those in the crowd who are the doubters; the folks who have to see things with their own eyes before they believe anything. As they were walking

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alongside the road, Bartimeaus undoubtedly heard the crowd going by and asked someone what was going on. They told him that it was Jesus of Nazareth, and Bartimeaus had heard enough about Jesus and his healing miracles in order to believe that here was a man who could possibly help him. Just like any person desperate for help would do; Bartimeaus had nothing to lose by trying to gain the attention of this Jesus. And so he begins to shout and to call out trying to get Jesus attention. "Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me!" We can imagine the blind man sitting in the dust beside the road, hearing the people all passing him by. Onlookers are embarrassed by his bold calls for attention. They scold him and tell him to shut up and be quiet. But Bartimeaus would not be silent. "Son of David, show me mercy." When Jesus heard the cry of the man, he stopped walking and asked the people to bring him forward. Wanting to see what would happen, the people encourage blind Bartimeaus to get up and to go to the Master. Throwing aside all that he had, Bartimeaus goes to the one who he believes without a doubt can help him. And because of his faith, his eyesight was restored and he began his new life following in the footsteps of Jesus. --When we hear this story about Bartimeaus, I don't know about you, but I am encouraged in my own faith. I wonder, what is the desire that is burning in my own hearts, what would I ask for if Jesus

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was standing in front of me? What would we do with our lives if we could believe and have faith in our lives and God's call on our lives just a little bit?

This week churches across the country celebrate the Reformation, and we recall this time as the birthday of our protestant denominations because of the internal uprising against the Catholic Church. The story is a familiar one, and worth retelling.

Martin Luther was born in 1483 in Eis-leben Germany. His parents wanted him to become a lawyer, and so they enrolled him in the best schools for that purpose. However once he graduated from the University of Erfurt, Luther dropped out of Law School to instead pursue a life of solitude and prayer as a monk. His parents were furious at what they saw was a waste of a hard won education. But the leadership in the monastery soon saw that Luther was not suited to stay prayer all day. He had a great mind that needed to be kept busy. The monastery ordered Luther to pursue an academic career in theology. After studying theology, Luther became ordained as a priest and began his life's work as a professor of Theology at the University of Wittenberg in 1512.

It was at Wittenberg, five years later in 1517 when Luther wrote his paper disputing the Catholic practice of the day that allowed people to buy

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God's forgiveness ahead of time. These pieces of paper, called "indulgences" were at the center of Luther's arguments against the leadership of the Catholic Church, as well as an argument against the Popes infallibility. Little did Luther know that those pointed questions, which came to be known as "The 95 Theses" would form the basis for the reformation. Because of his arguments that were first known in Wittenberg, the pope began the process of threatening Luther with excommunication from the Catholic church if he did not take back those heretical ideas. The ever courageous Luther upon receiving his notice from the pope to recant what he had argued, publically burned the popes demands and earned himself excommunication from the church in 1520.

In addition to banning Luther from the church, the pope also attempted to ban Luther's 95 Theses. Luther was ordered to come to a trial at the town of Worms; and he was shown a table filled with his books and writings. Luther was asked 2 simple questions by the secular authorities who were enforcing the ban on the 95 Theses. Luther was asked 1) If the books and the writings were his, and 2) If he still stood by the contents of the books or if he would deny them. Luther immediately confirmed that he was the author of the books and papers, but asked for a day to consider his

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answer to their second question. This one day adjournment was granted and Luther spent the next 24 hours in prayer and in consultation with his friends. The next day, when Luther was called in front of the council, he knew that he was risking his life as he gave the following speech:

Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. May God help me. Amen.

With his failure to recant, Luther became a wanted man. No punishment would come to anyone who murdered him and harboring or helping him was against the law. Nevertheless, the powerful nobleman Fredrick III, arranged to have Luther kidnapped by masked horsemen on his way home after the trial, and he secreted Luther away in Wartburg Castle for safekeeping. At Wartburg, Fredrick encouraged Luther to continue his work. Luther was given a secure place to live and everything he needed in order to continue his Reformation writing and studies. It was at Wartburg Castle that Luther translated the Bible into common German so that the common person could have access to the scriptures. Luther also continued writing his theological critiques of the church and made

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pronouncements against church practices that he thought were unscriptural. For a couple of years, the arrangement seemed to work. But in 1522, as Luther continued his theological work, and the common people read it, something began to go terribly wrong. The peasants in the countryside took their new freedom in Christ too literally. They began a revolt and a war against the upper class. They took the words of Luther that Christians should hold all things in common as a license to break into their wealthy neighbor's homes and to take anything they wanted. The peasants also struck back against the wealthy Church and they burned convents, monasteries, bishops palaces and libraries. Horrified by the misunderstanding of the common people, Luther returned to Wittenberg and began to preach the Christian virtues of love and charity and he especially preached against the use of violence as a means to change others. But despite Luther's removal of theological support for the peasants actions, and his directives against violence it still took over 3 years for the War of the Reformation to end.

Luther's later years in life were filled with both good and bad experiences. He married a beautiful ex nun named Katharina von Bora, and the two of them had six children. One of their children lived only a few

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months, and a daughter died in Luther's arms when she was twelve.

Luther began the work of organizing the German people into a new denomination and a new type of church, but his order of worship and communion liturgies were widely criticized as being too similar to the existing Catholic liturgies. He wrote hymns which were well received and his German translation of the Bible found eager acceptance and were used widely. But some of Luther's other doctrinal stands such as on communion and on the Jews proved to be controversial and very divisive in the new denomination. As Luther reached the age of 60, his ill health and multitudes of ailments made him rude and disagreeable. He was short tempered, harsh in his critiques and he fell out of favor with his fellow reformers and most of all, with the people. Martin Luther's last sermon, delivered in Eisleben three days before he died, was heard by only 5 people. Luther wrote a letter to a friend about the event, full of despair about how his "attempted reformation" of the church had failed. Martin Luther died at the age of 62, not living long enough to see that what he had started there in Germany began to spread to other countries and places, bringing the reformation to the Netherlands and to Scotland and ultimately to the new world of the America's. Luther's faith in God and in the gifts that God had given him planted seeds of faith that continue to grow today.

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So what does all of this mean for all of us sitting here today? The dreams that God places in your heart are not meant to simply stay there. They are meant to be acted on. The faith that you have in the abilities that God gave you and the opportunities that God puts in front of you are not there for you to ignore them. Like Bartimeaus, we are to take the opportunities that are in front of us and to boldly pursue them, even when others scold us or tell us to be quiet. Just like Martin Luther, even when our very lives are on the line we are to act with courage as the people of God and we are to live our lives in the faith that ultimately it is God who is in control. While not everything in our lives may turn out the way that we hoped, while there will be sorrow and hardship, while we may not see the results of all of our sacrifices and all of our standing up for what we believe in, those seeds of God's love and grace are stronger than human sin, and ultimately will take hold and change hearts and minds; even if we never see it in action. --May we each be inspired to live our lives for the purpose of Christ in faith every day. Amen.