

ON THE WAY TO JERICHO

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

October 25, 2009

Scripture: Psalm 34:1-8; Mark 10:46-52

There are few more dramatic or appealing accounts of healing stories in the New Testament than Mark's story of the healing of blind Bartimaeus, sitting by the roadside on the way to Jericho. There is a certain drama about it. It is the last story Mark tells before Jesus enters the city of Jerusalem, and so it's almost as if a door shuts and a bolt is thrown, and there is this drumbeat that starts, an inexorable move toward an arrest and a trial and a cross.

We know this healing story and love it because it's the story of the little guy, the one that is usually ignored who gets attention at long last and who wins the prize.

It reminds me of the story of Zaccheus in Luke's gospel, literally a small man, so short that he has to climb a tree to get a view of Jesus, but whose persistence in calling for help gets him a home visit from Jesus and forgiveness of his sin.

In contrast, in the story of Bartimaeus, it is his faith that makes him well and maybe his chutzpah, too, which overcomes the opposition of the crowd who tried to silence him.

The problem was that when they tried to quiet him, Bartimaeus cried out all the more saying "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me," a title (Son of David) that Mark has reserved for this moment in the gospel when Jesus draws close to Jerusalem, maybe to remind us of that other David so long before who entered the city to adulation.

Recently, scholars have made a connection between this story and Plato's Timaeus, a philosophical persona who represents the orderly resonance of reason in Plato's writing. Timaeus has the universe all figured out and he marvels at the order and beauty of the cosmos. He was the Ayn Rand of the third Century BC, this Timaeus. "If only we were ruled by reason," he argued, "as the universe is reasonable and balanced, life would be perfect."

Gordon Lathrop, in a recent book, has suggested that the story of the healing of blind Bartimaeus can be read on one level as the story of the dramatic displacement of Plato's philosophical hero Timaeus. Lathrop argues that when Bartimaeus throws off his cloak, and runs to Jesus, he is symbolically casting off the old order of reason and philosophy, and in its place he is putting on Christ.

In the story, Jesus praises Bartimaeus, whose name means Son of Timaeus, for his faith. It is his faith, Jesus says, that makes him whole, not his reasoning or intellect.

This is in direct contrast with the story that has just preceded it in Mark, the story we remembered last Sunday, the story of the disciples James and John jockeying for position, vying to be apostolic rock stars, to sit on Jesus' right and his left when he comes into his kingdom.

Bartimaeus, unlike the Twelve, receives his sight because of his blind faith, and even though he is not invited to do so, he follows Jesus on the way, Mark's favorite code language for saying that Bartimaeus became a faithful disciple. The contrast in stories

leaves you with a pointed question “Which would you rather be, a blind disciple who can’t get it right, or a newly *sighted* disciple who follows on the way?”

Some people read this story not so much as a putdown to philosophy as a signal of the miraculous power of Jesus to heal. For them, Jesus stands in the liminal place between heaven and earth and serves as the mediator of the grace of God breaking through in such a way that exceptional things happen from time to time; healing, restoration, even resurrection. I’m not one to question that literal understanding at all.

I settled for myself long ago that the ability of God to perform that which is beyond the explicable is possible whether I believe in it or not. And I have seen enough in my lifetime to believe that there are times when healing exceeds expectation, and grace abounds beyond our ability to explain.

No, for me the story is neither a putdown of philosophy nor a proof text for the miraculous powers of Jesus. What intrigues me about this story, having read it so many times before, is the way in which the blind man, who has literally been left by the side of the road to beg for his living, is ignored by strangers, cast out by friends, rebuked by the folks who are standing near him who are annoyed that he calls out to Jesus for attention. That’s what I find quite puzzling, and perhaps instructive.

You know there are many people in this city every day who are begging for a living, begging for handouts, begging for pocket change and dollar bills, dancing on the subways and playing in Mariachi bands on the Number 1 line. We all have our stories about how people beg for money and try to distinguish themselves so that they can get their cut of the action.

There is a man that I see rather frequently now on 6th Avenue, he’s maybe in his twenties, sits on a small blanket, with a sign that says, “I’m deaf and can’t talk, please help.” He sits cross-legged on his blanket with a coffee can in front of him and makes a violent and rather angry looking move, which I interpret to be American Sign Language. But I’ve looked up “help” and “give” and it’s neither of those that he is saying.

As I look at it, it’s more like this . . . , a phrase that I always thought was Italian. So I am not sure what he is trying to convey. But I do know that a lot of people stare at him, and were it not for the angry motions of his hands, they might even help him.

The street does strange things to you. Jack Coleman, former president of Haverford College on a sabbatical one year worked as a sanitation worker riding a city truck emptying baskets of trash on street corners. He remembers an elderly woman who once watched him dumping the foul smelling garbage of the street container in the back of the truck. When he drug the basket back to the curb the woman couldn’t contain herself any more. She said to him with contempt, “Do you think you’ll ever amount to anything?”

Maybe Bartimaeus was angry. Maybe folks had gotten fed up with his begging and his commotion to everybody going by whom he thought could help him. Maybe nobody thought he might ever amount to anything. I don’t know. I just know that when Jesus came by, they tried to get him to be quiet and not ruin everything for them.

Why is it we do that? Why do we have to put others down in order to promote ourselves? Isn't life hard enough without people keeping you from getting what you most need?

That's not the whole story on Bartimaeus, but it's an inescapable part of the story as far as I'm concerned. That detail that Mark includes about the crowd's reaction to Bartimaeus says so much, "Many sternly ordered [Bartimaeus] to be quiet..." Mark says. The New English Bible puts it this way, "Many people told him to hold his tongue."

And I'm thinking about the church and what it is that we may do sometimes consciously or unconsciously to keep people who so desperately need something from God, in their place, quiet, unnoticed.

D.T. Niles once said, "Evangelism is one poor beggar telling another where to find bread." And if that is the case, then God is the bread for which so many of us are hungering. We sense that, we hope it's true. We long for it to be so, and hunger for something that only God can satisfy even if we can't name it as such.

So we drag out of bed on a fine Sunday morning and come to church and lock ourselves into these old pews in the hope that an ancient message may yet have relevance for a modern life.

We hope like Bartimaeus that in those places where reason has failed and our wits have not scored us any points and we can't see very well what's in front of us, and we are left with our own thoughts; that there is something more to life than just our own thoughts.

Everybody here in one way or another is begging for something; more meaning, more truth, more hope, more life, more health, more sight, something better. And this story tells us a couple of things about that need.

One is that even in the church there may be some opposition to our getting the help we want. Everybody here is not yet perfected. In fact this side of heaven nobody is or is going to be perfect. But I believe that we are all trying to be faithful even if we are not very good at it.

Last Sunday it was raining when everybody was arriving for worship. And I noticed that the floor was getting wet at the entrance doors. Slippery on the tiles. And of course, we don't want the choir to come in and take a double header and fall right down in the aisle, so one of the custodians, Alfonso, came in with a mop just seconds before the procession began and he mopped up the wet areas in the vestibule and entrance where people might slip and fall if the dampness of outside were left on the floors inside.

And I thought, that's a pretty good parable of what we're trying to do in the church. We all bring a bit of the world and its values and its brokenness into this place, but we are trying to create a community of people who are helping one another rather than hindering one another. A place where the stuff from outside gets left behind when we enter. A place where healing and help is found, not hindrance or barrier.

This is a pretty amazing church. We are trying to create a community of healing and help, of support and mutuality. A place where children are welcome, a place where families who broaden the definition of family are at home. So many of you have worked so hard to have children, whether it be through medical intervention, or weathering the

storms of miscarriage, or traveling to the far corners of the world to adopt, or to create families of mixed ethnicity and color. And some of you have gotten help from someone else to have a child, and some of you are two mom or two dad parents, and some are raising other's children; we are so diverse in our backgrounds. The kids on Sunday morning sitting on the steps are like the United Nations. So many children, so many stories.

And we're all trying to find a faithful way to be Christians in this world and in this church and to live together faithfully, and to create a community where everybody who needs God (and who of us doesn't) can find God among us.

Now this will come as quite a surprise to many of you, but the city is a very secular place. There are a lot of people out there who see no need for God. Faith is not something that is welcome, and on the street here, and at a party or at a dinner, the best way to make sure that you are not invited back is to bring up the topic of your faith. It's like that crowd surrounding Bartimaeus. Nobody wanted him to be calling out to Jesus. No God talk please.

Well, I would hope that this is a place where the world's norms are reversed, a place where we can speak to each other of the things that count most to us, the questions that are deep within our hearts, the thoughts that we most long to consider, and to do so as fellow travelers along a road that takes us closer to God. My hope and prayer is that we might be less and less like that crowd that wanted to silence Bartimaeus, and more and more like that Son of David who called out to him and in that invitation brought forth healing.

There are a lot of images of the church that people have in their mind. Some call it a hospital for sinners. Some think of the church as the virgin mother who gathers her children to herself and makes them pure. I like to think of the church more as a Brueghel painting.

You know that wonderful Dutch Renaissance painter Pieter Brueghel the Elder whose earthy scenes of human interaction and life are so real and so inviting. Like that wonderful painting of *The Peasant Wedding*, where the long board of pies and bread are brought into the room by two bakers and placed in the midst of joyful revelers seated at the banquet table.

Or maybe even more, his *Netherlandish Proverbs* in which people are dancing, and playing cards, and making love, and laughing, and preparing food, and tending the sick, and spilling batter, and burying the dead, and shearing sheep, and climbing out on the roof, and if you look real closely even Jesus is in there, sitting on a red chair blessing a man who is kneeling before him.

Too often we try to make the church neat and tidy, nothing spontaneous going on, nobody calling out their most heartfelt need, or shouting out their deepest longing like, "Jesus, Son of David have mercy on me."

In contrast, Jesus calls forth the ones who are along the roadside, not just the folks that are presentable and proper and all buttoned down, but the Bartimaeuses of life as well, the ones who don't know any better than to just call out his name and ask for help. I'd like to think the church can be as good as that.

My friend Agnes Norfleet¹ is pastor of a wonderful church in South Carolina where Doug and Lonnie are members. If it takes a village to raise a child, sometimes it takes a church to support a couple with special needs. Doug and Lonnie are married and they are blind and as the years have gone by they have become more and more the object of the church's concern. They need a ride to church on Sundays; they need help with doctor's appointments during the week, and getting to the beauty parlor, and picking up medications, and sometimes financial guidance if not help.

And everybody wants them to be as independent as they can be, but as the years have gone by, in spite of their fierce independence they have become more and more needful of the deacons and the elders and everybody else that has befriended them in the church. And it takes a lot of organization. It would be a lot easier if they lived in a nursing home and all that, but the church is trying to help them manage as long as they can at home.

You'd think the church would run out of steam trying to look after a couple like that, but the truth is that folks in the church realize that they are better at practicing their faith with Doug and Lonnie in their midst than they would be if they were not.

Every year they have an Easter vigil in the church. And the order for the liturgy of the Easter vigil reaches its highest point at dawn before the first light of day has broken. The congregation is sitting in the darkened church, no candles, pitch black, so quiet all you can hear are your own thoughts, so dark that all you can see is the darkness.

It's at this point at Agnes' church every year that Doug and Lonnie, get up and find their way to the front of the darkened church and read one more time the story of the women who go to the tomb in darkness that first Easter morning. Only Doug and Lonnie can do that for that congregation, because they are the only ones in the church, reading by Braille, who can see the words of the dawning of hope in the midst of darkness.

After the story of the women coming to the tomb, Doug and Lonnie lead the congregation out to the church cemetery where the first of the morning's light is dawning and where, for expectant hearts the story of the resurrection is read.

I don't know about you, but I want to be a part of a church that understands itself like that. A church where anyone who cries out for God, may find God in the welcome of God's people.

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¹ I have taken liberties to change the names of the members of Agnes' church and to retell this story for the purposes of my sermon, not exactly as Agnes told it. The story I have told is one shared by Agnes Norfleet at the Moveable Feast gathering in Santa Fe, New Mexico this past January, 2009 and offered in response to a discussion of the Markan text.