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Proper 25B/Reformation
Peace, Seattle
October 28, 2012
Mark 10:46-52

WAVE OF MERCY

Mark doesn't tell us how long the beggar had been staking out his turf on the road at the edge of Jericho, but if you listen between the lines of the story, you can tell he was a veteran, all right.

This blind man was practiced at the art of begging,
- of telling the difference between the footfalls of pilgrims and the footfalls of locals—to whom he'd become like so much wall paper;
- of catching the scent of money in the air, when the crowds grew thicker, and the snorting of horses betrayed a rich man's retinue;
- of hearing the melody of women of stature passing in front of him, their jewelried headscarves jingling, and knowing when their eyes, however fleetingly, glanced his way.

He knew where to point his sightless eyes and when to shout HAVE MERCY! as the festivals funneled pilgrims past his perch. And he knew how to cry—from the gut—so that his voice would rise above the din of others, and would endure the shouting from sunup to sundown, day after day and day.

He knew all this and more. For if he didn't, if he hadn't, he wouldn't have survived.

Mark doesn't tell us any of this, but, curiously, he does tell us his name: BARTIMAEUS. WHY?

There are many others who, having met Jesus along the way in Mark's gospel, come away changed. Many for good, some for ill. But seldom do we learn their names.

Blind Bartimaeus is different.
- Is it because he, after his healing, became a true follower of Christ and was known and revered as such by those with whom he shared his story?
- Is it because of his sheer tenacity, his capacity to keep on shouting, uncowed, when everyone around him was telling him to shut up and disappear?
- Is it because this story comes straight from the lips of Bartimaeus himself, a man known by name to the very readers for whom Mark pens his gospel?
- Or is the name of Bartimaeus remembered because he is meant to be the model by which every one us would respond to the gospel?

Everything falls in place in this story.
- **A blind man's cries for mercy are heard.**
- **He is called to Jesus' side, listened to, healed.**
- **His life is transformed, and he follows Jesus on the way.**

Throughout the journey section of Mark's gospel, chapters 8-10, we follow Jesus on his way from Caesarea Philippi, north of Galilee, to the city of Jerusalem in the south, where his final days will unfold just as he has foretold, to the disbelief and dismay of his unenlightened disciples.

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This journey section is framed by Mark with the healings of two blind men: the blind man at Bethsaida (8:22ff) and blind Bartimaeus.

In between these two stories Jesus foretells his death and resurrection three times, and each time his inner circle responds in inappropriate ways—ways that demonstrate they just don't get it—they haven't connected the dots—of where this journey with Jesus is taking them.

- When Jesus speaks of himself as suffering servant, Peter rebukes him.
- When Jesus tells of betrayals and trials, they argue over who is the greatest.
- Finally (last week), after he speaks in detail about the humiliation and death that await him in Jerusalem, we watch James and John ask him for privileged positions of power.

In spite of everything they've heard and seen, in spite of all they've witnessed first hand, the disciples remain blind; while in contrast, two blind men come to see.

And so the gospel this Reformation morning, meets us squarely with the question:
How good is your eyesight, people of God? Are you able to see your own blindness? Are you able to seethe person next to you in need of healing? And are you able to recognize Jesus as the One who heals blindness and brings light to the world?

When Martin Luther nailed 95 theses to the door of the All Saints Church in Wittenberg, Germany in 1517, he started a movement that was aimed at opening the eyes of a church that had wandered far from the gospel core.

Self-serving practices that enriched the church hierarchy at the expense of the masses, like the sale of indulgences, represented just the leading edge of a deeply flawed church.

Brother Martin, who, like Bartimaeus, was never good at shutting up and staying in his place, had been tutored to fear a judging and wrathful God, but found his eyes opened so that he no longer saw in the cross of Christ his condemnation, but instead the source of true grace and the end of all human striving after God.

Faith was not about amassing a collection of righteous acts or good deeds in order to win God's approval, it was about putting our trust in the one who, through the cross and empty tomb, brought healing, safety, and forgiveness to all as a totally free gift.

Receiving renewed relationship with God as a free gift frees us so that life no longer needs to revolve around our own needs or our own sins. Instead we are free in Christ to love and serve the neighbor.

Last Sunday in confirmation we talked about how different a mindset it is to think of the church as a community of people rather than as a building. GOING TO CHURCH on Sunday, isn't about showing up at this building, it's about being part of a community.

And caring for one another as Christ cares for us is the heart of this community. Differences of opinion and perspective will always be part of the mix; but expressing our love through simple acts of caring is the true ground on which our life together is founded.

Congregations who've lost their buildings to earthquake, fire, flood have learned over and over again that when a building disappears, the most important thing remains: the community.

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In his eagerness to teach the Corinthian congregation what it means to be the church, Paul roles out the image of the church as the body of Christ with many different parts—each of which is necessary, each of which contributes to the whole, interacting, working together, suffering when one member suffers; rejoicing when one member rejoices.

In his essay on the Blessed Sacrament, Brother Martin writes:[1]

> "When you have partaken of this sacrament, therefore, or desire to partake of it, you must in turn share the misfortunes of the fellowship…all the unjust suffering of the innocent, with which the world is everywhere filled to overflowing. You must fight, work, pray, and—if you cannot do more—have heartfelt sympathy."

At times, the church has seemed more intent on putting roadblocks in front of those who are searching for mercy and grace, than on welcoming them into the company of Christ.

But whenever the church becomes so fixated in its own issues that it ignores the needs of those who cry for MERCY, Christ stops dead in his tracks and calls for our attention to be focused just where the world is crying and in pain.

In our story, we learn that Bartimaeus is not dissuaded by the rebukes of the insider group. He persists until his shouts are recognized. He refuses to be defined by his circumstances or by the expectations of those who are able to see, who appear to be close to Jesus, and who assume the right to speak on his behalf. By refusing to be muzzled, Bartimaeus ensures that his call will be heard by Jesus.[2]

<u>And his call is heard.</u> Bartimaeus' call for mercy sets in motion a <u>wave of mercy</u>, blessing, and transformation.

- Jesus calls for him. And when that happens, those around Jesus no longer tell Bartimaeus to shut up; no longer speak sternly to him. Instead they now call him to Jesus with exciting and encouraging words: TAKE HEART! CHEER UP! GET UP! HE IS CALLING YOU!
- Once <u>roadblocks</u> to mercy, they have now become <u>vessels</u> of mercy, and <u>witnesses</u> to what Jesus can do when we, the church, <u>see</u> our neighbors, then <u>go</u> to them, invite them to meet Jesus, and welcome them as fellow and sister travelers without reserve.

The core of practicing our faith is being Christ to one another. But before we can do that, we must see each other.

Jose Luis Descalzo writes:[3]

> "I wonder if evil, in all its forms, is not above all a form of blindness…selfishness dazzles us and prevents us from seeing the person next to us."

- Sometimes that's hard to see because we ourselves are hurting.
- Sometimes it's hard to see because we've found a place that's comfortable on the journey and we don't want to be interrupted, thank you very much!
- Sometimes the pain we run across in the world is so HUGE and so overwhelming, that we just can't imagine how we could possibly make a difference.

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[1] *Treatise on the Blessed Sacrament,* 1519
[2] Lincoln Galloway, *Feasting on the Word. Year B:4* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009) 215.
[3] *Reasons for Hope.* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007) pp. 75,76.

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The truth is, there are always powerful forces in the world that want to keep the pain of the world mute.[4]

But Jesus—Jesus is able to look the pain, the suffering, the tragedy of circumstance—ours and others'— straight in the eye and to do it without blinking. Calling us to his side, he invites us to listen and give voice to these deepest yearnings, and promises that we will all be heard.

And when we're heard, the old way, the old cloak, the old life—which once was our refuge, our safe haven, our crutch, our hope, our trust—the old life is cast aside, and we rise to take steps toward a new, a resurrected life.

For once we were blind. But now—thanks be to God!—now, we see.

Amen.

[4] Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes a Poet.* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1989) p. 56.