

Pentecost 21B 2009

Proper 25

Texts: Job 42:1-6, 10-17

Psalm 34: 1-8, 19-22

Hebrews 7:23-28

Mark 10: 46-52

“Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Mark 10: 47

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart, be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord my strength and my redeemer. Amen.

It is hard to believe, but in the next month we will be finishing the Gospel of Mark and starting the Gospel of Luke. Advent starts in a mere five weeks. Between preaching on Job all this month and on the Letter of James in September, I don't think we have heard about Mark since Labor Day when Bobbi's sister was visiting and was kind enough to preach. So let me remind you of where we are in the gospel.

Chapters 8 through 10 in Mark is a turning point. The focus moves from Jesus performing miracles; feeding the five thousand, walking on water, calming the storm and driving demons out of people, to teaching about what it means to be a disciple. In this section Jesus turns from his travels all over the area and sets his sight on Jerusalem. Three times Jesus predicts his death and three times the disciples just don't get it, or refuse to believe it.

What is interesting about this section, this hinge that swings the story in another direction, is that it has two stories of Jesus restoring sight on either end. The first story is the healing of the blind man at Bethsaida. Some friends bring him to Jesus who puts spit on his eyes and anoints him. At first the man's sight is distorted. He thinks he knows what he sees, but it doesn't make much sense. His sight isn't clear and he tells Jesus that he knows he is seeing people, but that they look like trees walking around. It wasn't until Jesus touches the man's eyes again that clear sight is achieved. It was a process that opened the man's eyes.

At the other end of the section is our reading for this morning, the story of blind Bartimaeus. Bartimaeus is a beggar; the only way he can survive is to sit outside the city gates and call out for people to throw some charity and compassion his way.

In between these two stories Jesus talks about the necessary suffering he is to undergo, how to follow him means walking in the way he walks, the way of the cross.

The two stories right before our story this morning are that of the rich young man and James and John. The rich young man falls to his knees before Jesus and asks, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus refers him to the Ten Commandments, especially those that have to do with how one treats another. The young man assures Jesus that he has kept those commandments. Jesus tells him to go and sell all that he has and to give the proceeds to the poor. The young man goes away disappointed, unable to give up what he has. His possessions hold him back from following Jesus.

On the way to Capernaum, James and John start arguing about who is the greatest. They start jockeying for position believing glory and power will be theirs. They still do not understand that glory and power will be theirs, but not in the way they believe or want. They believe they can drink of the cup that Jesus drinks, but they don’t understand that it is a cup of death.

Two stories of restoring sight on either end, with a whole lot of being blind and misunderstanding in between.

In the gospel of Mark, it is not only what is said that is important, but also where it is said. The position of a story in Mark is as much a story in and of itself. It is the contrast between having sight or being blind, it is the juxtaposition of insight to blind ambition, that Mark wants us to be aware of.

Here are Jesus’ hand-chosen followers, and they are blind to what following the Master means. Outsiders, the blind man at Bethsaida and Bartimaeus, are brought to Jesus and they have more understanding, more insight, than all the twelve put together.

The disciples and the rich young man ask Jesus for things that will enrich them further. Bartimaeus asks for mercy. The disciples and rich man ask out of their abundance, but Bartimaeus asks Jesus to make him see again, out of his desperation and need.

There are several things about the story of Bartimaeus that speak directly to discipleship, and make no mistake; Bartimaeus was a disciple after meeting Jesus.

Bartimaeus calls out to Jesus. He seized the opportunity when he hears that Jesus is coming. Others would try to get him to shut-up, but in the face of opposition Bartimaeus calls out all the more loudly, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.” That calling out stops Jesus in his tracks.

In my mind's eye I see Jesus in the crowd, walking with his friends, listening to the hustle and bustle all around him; the goats and donkeys braying, the shuffle of several hundred feet and then Jesus just stops. He hears a cry of distress and desperation. Bartimaeus calls out to Jesus and Jesus in turn calls Bartimaeus to himself.

We are told that Bartimaeus jumps up and throws off his cloak. As a beggar, his cloak was everything. It was what gathered the meager coins that helped him survive. It kept him warm at night or acted as a pillow for his head. In that one action Bartimaeus is able to do what the rich young man couldn't—he gave all he had to follow Jesus.

Jesus asks Bartimaeus the same question, in exactly the same words, that he asked James and John. “What is it you want me to do for you?” James and John ask for privilege, Bartimaeus asks to be restored to wholeness.

Jesus does restore him to wholeness and Bartimaeus follows him on the way—the way to Jerusalem, and to death.

What an example of faith Bartimaeus gives us. In the face of increasing opposition, Bartimaeus continues to call out to the one he knows can heal him.

In our day and time it would be so much easier to ignore our faith, rather than proclaim it. We don't want to be seen as pushy. We don't want to wear our religion on our sleeve or act piously. Actually, I don't think the issue is acting so much as being perceived to be acting in a falsely pious manner. Christianity is seen much more negatively than in

decades past, and people of faith are looked at with suspicion, if not downright hostility at times.

We can let that suspicion and hostility silence us, or we can continue in voicing our faith. Not arrogantly, but humbly. Not because we see ourselves as better than those who may not believe, but because we know from first hand experience that Jesus heals and restores. We know first-hand the mercy that is ours for the asking. We know how life can be when our eyes are finally opened to God's grace.

Bartimaeus is an example of a disciple because not only does he call out to Jesus, but he also responds with all he has when Jesus calls to him. His life, centered for all those years around begging and depending on the compassion of strangers, is now centered on the love of Jesus, and God is what Bartimaeus depends on.

Are we like Bartimaeus? Or are we closer to the rich young man, who loves Jesus, but just can't make that one final leap of faith, can't decide to rely on God rather than all he has accumulated to make him comfortable and safe?

A clergy colleague of mine was wondering if this economic downturn was a blessing in disguise. He wondered whether people would pull together to help one another, or hoard and look out only for themselves and their immediate families. I don't know the answer to his question and certainly seeing friends and families lose their jobs and homes is very difficult and you wouldn't wish that hardship on anyone. But at the same time I have to wonder if going through such uncertainty and adversity can't teach us something about where our dependence truly lies.

The story of Bartimaeus is a healing story, but it is also and as importantly, a call story. Bartimaeus calls to Jesus, Jesus responds to Bartimaeus by calling him to himself. Bartimaeus is healed and follows Jesus.

Bartimaeus' story can be our story. We can be healed of our blindness to our own needs and the needs of others. We can have our spiritual eyes opened to the truth of the One who goes to the cross for us.

We are all called to Jesus' side. We are all called to respond to Jesus' question, "What is it that you want me to do for you?" We all have the opportunity to answer, "Have mercy on me. Heal me." And then when we have answered the call, when we get up to follow Jesus on the way, we have the opportunity to ask him, "What is it you want me to do for you?"

Amen.