

THE FAITH THAT MAKES US WELL 10/25/15 – Stewardship week 2 (instead of unison after middle hymn)

UNICEF SUNDAY: Children sing after Lord's prayer (confirm with Karen S. what)

Scripture: Mark 10:46-52 (51)

Hymns: 1) #547 "Amazing Grace" 2) #252 "Savior, Like a Shepherd Lead Us" 3) #527 "We Offer Christ"

CALL TO WORSHIP

Leader: Come and bless the Lord.

People: We come to seek God's grace.

L: Christ hears our every cry.

P: We need God's healing touch.

L: Take heart, have faith, for Christ has called us here.

All: We come to bless the Lord!

INVOCATION & LORD'S PRAYER

Jesus, Son of David, hear us as we call to you today. Speak to us in this holy time. Enter our lives and heal us, so that we may hear your truth and trust in your grace. Claim us as your own, so that we may go forth in the wholeness of faith. Hear us as we pray: "Our Father..."

THE FAITH THAT MAKES US WELL

Here we have Jesus, on the road. He has set his face towards Jerusalem. He knows he is going there to challenge all the faith structures of his time, and face the time of hard testing. He knows he is going there to die. His apostles and other disciples are on the road with him, although they do not have the same certainty about what is to come. It's a large crowd by now; the original twelve have been joined by a whole collection of people who have decided that they will follow Jesus, and have taken to the road with him. They are close, now, to Jerusalem, at Jericho, the last leg of the journey. Coming into Jericho, they find the usual crowd of people hoping to see Jesus, hoping to learn something from Jesus, hoping to be healed by Jesus. **In that crowd is the blind man, Bartimaeus; and when he hears that this is Jesus, he cries out VERY loudly: "Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me!"** He was shushed—why bother Jesus? But Bartimaeus cries out again, more loudly, "Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me!" And something amazing happens. Jesus hears—that's not the amazing part—and he stops and stands still and asks for Bartimaeus to be brought before him.

This is a well-known story. The healing of blind Bartimaeus. There are Sunday School songs about it. In Mark's gospel it's the last miracle before the start of the passion story. We don't know anything about this man except that he was blind and is called Bar-timaeus – that is, in Hebrew, son of Timaeus. Which is pretty outstanding, because the other people Jesus healed aren't named in the gospel. He's a beggar, pretty much all a blind person could do to survive in that first century Judean culture. So **what Bartimaeus really known for? For calling out, persistently, naming Jesus as the Son of David...which is to say, the rightful king.... and making the request: "have mercy on me."**

Bartimaeus is known for his nerve. Do we have that kind of nerve? Would we cry out boldly with a humble request for mercy if Jesus was walking by? This blind man didn't start with a specific request like others who approached Jesus - heal my child, give me a blessing. He didn't come in a formal way, he didn't wait until he was summoned for an audience, he didn't line up a formal meeting, and he didn't bring a gift. **All he did was cry out for mercy, and refuse to be silenced.**

When do **we** need to think to do that, to call upon Jesus, not with a list of demands, or requests, or desires, but just asking for mercy? I've prayed at sickbeds and deathbeds in the last couple of months. And I've become aware that we typically ask for mercy ONLY when all seems lost, and there is nothing left but prayer. I've also **thought about how rarely I pray for mercy for myself; often it's a prayer for others** who are in trouble, or when so much bad is happening it seems important to beg for mercy. I've prayed like that – "Lord, have mercy!" after the numerous mass shootings and other terrible things that have happened recently, and

it's not wrong to do that....but when do any of us call out, insistently, from the sidelines, and say Jesus, Lord, have mercy on me?

It's a gutsy thing to do, all right. Don't you think there was that moment when Jesus stood still and everyone wondered how he was going to react? "Call him here," Jesus says, and his followers do. Bartimaeus leaps up, tosses off his cloak, and goes to Jesus. In an interesting way, **this blind man who has called loudly upon Jesus by his messianic role—son of the house of David, the rightful ruler-- this blind man has "seen" and named something that others have not.** He has recognized something beyond the teacher and the feeder and the healer. Naming Jesus as the long-promised one, the Messiah, he cries out for mercy. And Jesus responds to that cry, that spontaneous moment of recognition, with an act of recognition of his own. "What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asks him. And Bartimaeus asks for sight. "My teacher, let me see again."

Now, in the Bible, **the topic of sight** is often a lot more than just what happens when the eye is opened and light and shadow and color are transmitted to the brain. It's an important part of our experience, seeing...but **there are ways of seeing that go beyond the eye.** And that is going on here: Bartimaeus is asking for vision, for his eyes to work, and **he is also asking for vision, for the ability to conceive and imagine and look for outcomes not formerly imagined.** We know this by the way he called upon Jesus. Although blind, he has already 'seen' who Jesus really is, something not seen – or understood - by the religious leadership of his time.

When Bartimaeus gets to Jesus, he is asked the big question: "what do you want me to do for you?" And this blind man, who has never met Jesus before, says, "my teacher, let me see again." He is hoping to regain the sight he lost. But in naming Jesus as he Son of David and now as 'my teacher,' Bartimaeus has already perceived something important, an he is expressing his hope to see God at work in the world. To regain a vision that God's people had all but lost, after so many years of waiting—a vision of the coming of the messiah, of the world being actively transformed into God's kind of place. The Kingdom of God, and Jesus in the throne of David.

I think we can relate to this hope for salvation. Our world is a struggling place. Anger and selfishness seem to be the most prevalent emotions. Many people have turned away from the Christian faith because they have seen Christians who act as a judgmental in-group of the saved, waiting for end times. Many more mistrust Christians because certain elements have caused the faith to be associated with persons and practices that are more like the Pharisees than like Jesus. Angry people are doing unbelievable acts of violence and claiming that in those acts they are somehow doing service to the God of Abraham. Angry and strident preachers sharing a story about an angry God who needs to be appeased by our self-debasement. We wonder what the future will hold for our church, for our house of worship, where we do not

badger or threaten people into faith. We wonder what will come as the community around us changes. We need to see. We need vision.

Bartimaeus makes his bold request for vision and Jesus declares him healed: "Go: your faith has made you well." And immediately Bartimaeus can see! And immediately he takes up the Jesus path, he follows Jesus on the way. Think about the first thing that Bartimaeus saw! After the incomprehensible blaze of light, it is Jesus. Bartimaeus did not earn this healing. He did call upon Jesus but he did not submit proof of his worthiness. He was not required to take certain actions or say certain things to demonstrate his faithfulness: Jesus perceived it, and declared to Bartimaeus that his faith had made him well. His eyes were opened and what he saw was his savior, his strong deliverer. He asked for mercy and sight, and he received redemption and vision, and a welcome into the community of the followers of Jesus, a restoration into a new kind of life.

The first hymn this morning, "Amazing Grace," is so beloved by so many of us. It was written by a former slave ship captain, who experienced that eye-opening moment when Jesus blazed into his new, renewed sight and transformed his life from working to enslave people to working for the freedom of all in Christ. "I once was lost, but now I'm found, was blind but now I see." We long for that pure true sense of grace. We hope and pray to see Jesus. **Are we like Bartimaeus? Or are we hopeful but blind to our own need for mercy? It would feel a lot better to just be able to get it right and create the conditions for grace.** To be sure that, by living a certain way, by praying a certain way, we have somehow achieved salvation. **But it is not our actions that save us.** It is through God's actions that we are redeemed, turned around, brought out of blind darkness into the light of love. **What we do is all response to what God, acting in Christ, has done first, for our sakes.**

What do you suppose Bartimaeus told people about the day when he met Jesus? I'm sure he had something to say! He became a follower, but we do not have a gospel story from him. All we have is this, that he called out and Jesus responded. His life would never be the same. I would think he was eager to tell everyone what Jesus did for him....and I hope he also told people that it was not because he was 'chosen,' somehow better than them in some way, but because Jesus is seeking us all, listening for our voices, offering us vision.

So what does this mean for us, as the church, as the followers of Jesus? I think there are some important insights. **First, we need to be out there, by the path, ready when Jesus appears.** Bartimaeus could not see so he was not as distracted as we get. And his world didn't have as many things that called attention away from the path of compassion and reconciliation and truth. We need to be sure we are in the places where we know Jesus will be: among the poor, caring for the sick, sheltering the homeless and the refugee, comforting those who are filled

with despair and grief. **The life of faithfulness is not about making all conditions right or assuring success before starting: it's mostly about showing up.**

Second, we need to have the courage to call out. I know that is hard. I know that many of us don't want to be associated with certain kinds of evangelism that claim God requires certain dedicated words and unshakeable belief, no room for doubts. But we live in a world where science discovers new things all the time, and this church holds the belief that science and religious faith are not at war with one another. We believe that it's important—in fact, that it's the path of wisdom—to have questions, not crystallized opinions. From our own understanding we need to call out to Jesus, trusting he will respond. From our doubts and despair. From our questions and our shaky answers. From our sense of rightness and our sense of wrongness. In all things, we need to call upon Jesus. Our middle hymn ended with the assertion I think we all need to make a regular practice: “Blessed Jesus, Blessed Jesus, hear your children as we pray.”

And third, we need to jump up, and toss aside what we gives us security just as Bartimaeus jumped up and tossed aside his cloak. When Jesus says come here, we need to go without hesitation. It may sometimes be very hard to go. Last week we heard how a young man was challenged because he didn't want to let go of his stuff. Following Jesus may at times feel like we are walking blindly. It may be a challenge to put one foot in front of another. **But if we do not go, how will we receive the blessing and even more importantly, how can we then BE THE BLESSING?**

Jesus called people like Bartimaeus not from their power and sufficiency but from their brokenness. And **they found they had what they needed to do what God asked of them.** Jesus calls out to us, to his church, to the community that is called the Body of Christ, and we have to choose to respond. **Every day, in every choice, we need to choose to BE THE CHURCH.** This Sunday our children are collecting coins that will be turned into vaccines and care for children in need all over the world. **They are being the church right now,** when they do this. We are all getting ready to bake many pans of cookies and bag them up two by two, so that the folks at Crossroads can be nourished not just by the flour and the butter and the sugar in them but by the intention and caring that go into something made with our hands to be given to them. We need to make stewardship choices, not just about what money we will give but also how it will be used: for our comfort and satisfaction alone? Or for the sake of the world? We need to make stewardship choices about how we use our time and our abilities, about how we offer the things that each of us, every one of us, can do in the world as followers of Jesus. **To be good stewards, we need to ask for sight to see what needs to be done, and vision to perceive the ways that we can proclaim God's greatness and grace, and offer peace, reconciliation, compassion, and selfless love in the name of Christ to our world.**

Let us pray: Jesus, son of David, have mercy on us. Open our eyes to see where you are leading us. Open our hearts so that we may be willing to go. Give us vision to imagine the many ways that we can be your church for the sake of your world. When we feel fear and doubt, strengthen our faith. When the people around us shush and discourage us, help us to speak up. And in all things, shower us with your forgiving, transforming love. Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus, hear your children as we pray. Amen.