

The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush

October 25, 2009

Mark 10:46-52

“The Unwelcome Visitor”

Today’s worship service is intended to highlight some of the unique qualities of each service offered here at ELPC. Many churches are only able to provide one service on Sunday mornings, sort of a “one size fits all” liturgical model. Some churches offer two services, with one being more contemporary and one having a more traditional liturgy. For various reasons, we are fortunate to offer six different worship services. But I am not boasting about this fact. If people were possessive and competitive about the particular service they visit, having six worship services would be a liability, not an asset. Hopefully members and friends have attended different worship services and see the variety offered as simply reflecting the breadth and diversity inherent in every expression of God’s creative Spirit.

At ELPC, we like to stress that this is a church where everyone is welcome. That is not a particularly novel concept. Lots of churches have the phrase “visitors welcome” emblazoned across signs out front. But not every church, including ours, truly acts as if visitors are welcome. That is part of the challenging message contained in today’s gospel lesson about blind Bartimaeus.

As a blind man in biblical times, your career options were pretty limited. The loss of eyesight was generally seen as a punishment from God. Or at the very least, it was a good excuse for others to keep their distance from you. So, Bartimaeus begged. He sat near the gate through which people passed who were leaving town. Why there? Well, the folks going into the city were anxious to arrive. The people leaving had hopefully made some money, or filled their saddle bags and money purses in preparation for the exit journey. They were prime candidates to hit up for a spare coin or extra piece of bread. Ask them for mercy. Hope they would toss something onto your tattered cloak spread out before you along side the dusty Jericho road.

On this day, Jesus and his entourage were leaving the city. Bartimaeus then began to shout – loudly. Being blind, you have no way of telling if people are looking at you or coming your way, so you have to shout extra loud to get their attention. And poor Bartimaeus had no one to advocate for him. There was no one who stood beside the road, pointing people toward the blind beggar asking for alms. Bartimaeus had no companion or patron, so he had to do the best he could on his own. (How often today is that still the case? Despite anti-discrimination and anti-racism laws, how many people never get that job interview, that apprenticeship or internship, that club membership or board invitation because they lack connections and patrons among the power-class? There are lots of Bartimaeuses even today.)

So as Jesus left Jericho, surrounded by his disciples and followers, Bartimaeus began shouting loudly to get his attention - vocally intruding into his space. It was an awkward social moment. When I served a church in Wisconsin, there was a big-boned woman

named Barbara who used to come by regularly, always on the brink of a major crisis, always needing just a few bucks or more than a few bucks to tide her over. I heard her stories and I often gave her cash. And despite sworn oaths about rapid repayment, the debts were never repaid. Over time, I stopped giving her cash, but would give her food and offer a listening ear when I could. One day Barbara came in with another hard-luck story. Soon she got worked up, talking about how hungry she was. How she hadn't eaten in a long time; and that she was so hungry, why, I looked like a giant old chicken drumstick and she was tempted to just eat me right up! What could I do? I ran for my life and quickly got her a bag of groceries from our little food pantry!

Back to the gospel story: How many people were healed that day outside Jericho? One, you might say – blind Bartimaeus. I'd argue that many, many more had their eyes healed that day. It was not always easy to get to Jesus. Remember how he was healing inside a house one day, and the crowds were so thick around him that two men tore a hole in the roof over his head so they could lower a paralyzed friend down beside him? Remember also the time that the Syrophenician woman wanted healing for her daughter and she shouted, "Have mercy on me, Son of David," but Jesus' disciples told Jesus to send her away, because she kept shouting at them? (Mt 15:23) Or when people were bringing little children to be blessed by Jesus, and the disciples spoke sternly to them and tried to shoo them away? (Mk 10:13)

On that day long ago, the biggest impediment facing Bartimaeus was not his blindness, but rather the blindness of the crowd who shouted at him to be quiet and leave Jesus alone. So Jesus had to do two acts of healing. Before Bartimaeus' eyes were healed, Jesus turned to the disciples and ill-mannered crowd and told them, "Call him here." And suddenly their eyes were opened, and the beggar they had tried to intimidate became someone they now encouraged and invited. "Take heart! Cheer up! Come, he is calling you!" Rudeness changed to pious hospitality. The unwanted visitor became an invited guest of honor.

In all our lives, there are people whom we avoid; people who don't fit into our immediate circle of friends; outsiders who make inappropriate requests of us. What is true of us is true of every institution in life – our businesses, our social clubs, and our churches. Especially our churches. Every institution establishes rules and builds structures not so much for the benefit of those within, but to serve as a barrier for those we would keep out. Call it what you will: quotas, membership requirements, visas, minimum educational guidelines, Jim Crow laws, apartheid, separate but equal, and all those things that fall under the rubric of "that's just how we do things around here." Bartimaeuses still stand outside our churches, our city halls, our courtrooms, our Fortune 500 companies and shout "Have mercy on me." Why? Why should we? It's a fair question to ask, since we too often walk past beggars today and soundproof our institutions to their cries of need.

Bartimaeus shouted "Have mercy on me," which was a cry of need. But the word he used is one the Greek bible commonly used to translate the Hebrew word "hesed," which means God's steadfast love and justice. Bartimaeus isn't looking just for a handout. He is looking for *hesed*, for justice, for a bit of God's kingdom made real here

on earth. God's kingdom wasn't huddled around Jesus that day. God's kingdom was waiting to be manifest in that space between Jesus, the crowd, the church, the community, and the blind beggar shouting from the side of the road.

I don't believe I've ever told this story before, but one day back in Wisconsin Barbara visited the church with another anxious request. Her landlord had filed an eviction notice against her, hoping to kick her out of her apartment. And since he lived in the next county, and knew Barbara couldn't drive, he filed his case in the town of Burlington hoping Barbara would not show up and be cited for contempt. Barbara was righteously upset and asked me to drive her the 15 miles to Burlington. That day. In fact, we needed to leave soon. I'm no saint. I agreed to help Barbara, but I wasn't in the best mood about it. But as we drove outside the city limits and headed into the countryside on the way to Burlington, Barbara's normal diatribe against her landlord changed and she began commenting on the cows she saw along the roadside. How tall the cornstalks were this time of year. How she hadn't seen the countryside for years and how green and alive everything looked. I realized Barbara likely never got to go for a ride in the country. Her life was spent surviving, often in a hostile community, banging on doors and cajoling people for handouts. She was no saint either. But she was a child of God, and when she commented on the cows and corn and blue skies, I suddenly was able to see them too, despite the fact that I'd been staring at them all along but had been totally blind to their beauty. So Barbara and I had a nice drive to Burlington, and she healed my vision that day.

Bartimaeus knew what he wanted and no naysayers, no bouncers or social bullies were going to shut him up or shut him down. "My teacher," he said, "let me see again." Having opened the eyes of the crowd already, now Jesus opened Bartimaeus' eyes too. And scripture says "immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way." Yes, we travel well-worn paths each day of our lives – toiling within institutional walls at work, living in structures of privacy in our neighborhoods, even worshiping according to comfortable patterns of our own choosing on Sundays. Where we work, live, shop, and worship always runs the risk of becoming places of exclusion – which is why Jesus still heals the blind today.

Remember this: Houses of faith are not defined by the walls that hold people in, but rather by the doors that allow all who are called to freely come in and go out and be made whole. The same is true for your life. We close our eyes in prayer; we read scripture and imagine in our mind's eyes who this Christ was and is, and picture his face before us – and it is right to do so. But we see Christ when we show mercy and love justice and do so in the border zones of our life – the thresholds between inside and outside, acceptance and rejection, welcome and dismissal. Stand in those spaces for a while this week, and look around. You'll be amazed, no, you'll be healed and made whole by what you see.

AMEN