

23 Pentecost Mark 10:46-52
Christ and Grace October 28, 2018
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When I was in elementary school, just beginning to read chapter books, I fell in love with a biography series, *Childhood of Famous Americans*. I loved reading these biographies – they transported me far away from my quiet, predictable life. Every year I reread the biography of Helen Keller because all that Helen overcame inspired me. The first time I read it I was so fascinated with the idea of being visually or hearing impaired that I would spend days pretending I could not see or hear. I would put cotton in my ears and blindfold myself and then walk all around the house, feeling my way along the walls, counting steps from my room to the front door, and simply sitting in the darkness and silence to try to experience what Helen Keller must have experienced.

It wasn't until later that I remember reading the story of Bartimaeus, but his story reminded me right away of Helen Keller and my own attempts to experience a world without sight or sound. I empathized immediately with Bartimaeus – how he must have felt, sitting beside the dusty road in the midst of the crowd yet isolated, probably able to feel the rumbling of a crowd of people approaching, knowing someone important must be on the way.

Blindness, both physical and spiritual, plays an important role in Mark's Gospel. The healing of Bartimaeus concludes a section of the Gospel that begins in chapter eight, where Jesus heals another blind man, and then must address the spiritual blindness of his disciples. Jesus tells his disciples three times what will happen in Jerusalem. Peter's reaction is to rebuke Jesus, and the reaction of the other disciples is one of confusion—they are afraid to ask anything. Next, the disciples fall into an argument about who is greatest; and right after that, James and John tell Jesus that they want to sit on his right and left in glory. Finally, Jesus meets Bartimaeus on the way to Jerusalem.

We can see how this section of the Gospel, chapters 8-10, begins and ends with physical blindness, with recurring spiritual blindness in between. Finally it's Bartimaeus who helps Jesus teach the disciples to see that faith and response are necessary for discipleship. Mark is writing with urgency to his community, one that was suffering persecution and beginning to grow weary. They needed a reminder course in discipleship. Maybe we do, too.

The image of a person sitting on the side of the road, asking for help but being ignored or even silenced by others, is a troubling one, perhaps because it is not so difficult to imagine. Can we hear the news each day and not see Bartimaeus? Who are the Bartimaeus figures in our society? How are we responding to their needs?

Maybe Bartimaeus is closer to home - the neighbor we hope we won't meet on our walk, because she talks a lot and slows us down. Or the beggar at the stoplight we see on the way home from work every day. Sometimes it's hard to tell if someone is physically or spiritually disabled, isn't it?

Have you ever been a roadside beggar? Oh, maybe not in the literal sense, but have you ever found yourself sidelined while life seems to pass you by? Do you have needs or longings in your heart that no one notices or even knows about? Perhaps you are already calling out but are being silenced by others.

Jesus hears us even when we are being silenced by others. Bartimaeus called out for mercy and Jesus heard him. And in that moment the disciples seemed to understand what being a disciple meant. It meant helping others find Jesus. It meant calling them to take heart and get up. Disciples do not keep others away from Jesus, they welcome them, even those on the margins, into the presence and healing love of Jesus.

When the disciples made a way for Bartimaeus to respond to Jesus, he responded by throwing off his cloak, which was probably the only possession he owned, and he sprang up and came to Jesus. And when Jesus asked him, "What do you want me to do for you?" Bartimaeus asked to see again, and Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." But that's not the end of the story.... When Bartimaeus regained his sight, he followed Jesus on the way. He became a disciple, putting his faith into action.

We are here because we have faith, even if it's only the size of a mustard seed. But Jesus can work with that! The question for us is how will we respond to Jesus in faith? How will we be disciples who make a way for others to see Jesus, how will we encourage those we know and love, as well as those on the margins to take heart and get up?

Today marks the end of our stewardship annual pledge campaign. We are here because of the faith and encouragement of those who have come before us. We are blessed with amazing resources in the gifts given to each one of us. Because we each give of our time, talent, and treasure, Christ and Grace continues to be a place where people can see Jesus, where people are healed and encouraged and strengthened in faith. As stewards we are called to care for what has been entrusted to us by God. Of course this means the ongoing maintenance needs of our building, the care of our grounds, and care of the holy things used in worship. But there is greater treasure here with which we have been entrusted. That treasure is this faith community. It's every single one of us, called by God, gathered here as the Body of Christ. The treasure is that we are a faith community entrusted with the Gospel of Christ.

This morning there is an offering plate on the communion table that holds all of the pledges you have made for the continued support of this parish. If you brought your pledge card to worship today, simply place it in the offering plate. As we begin the Eucharistic Prayer these committed responses in faith to God's call will be blessed, that they might be a blessing to all of God's children through the work of this parish.

If you recall the story of Helen Keller, you know that her sight and hearing were never restored, but her teacher, Anne Sullivan, refused to leave her sitting in darkness and silence. Reflecting on the time when her teacher held her hand under the running water and spelled the word "water" into her other hand, Helen said, "Somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. "I knew then that 'w-a-t-e-r' meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free... I believe that all through

these dark and silent years, God has been using my life for a purpose I do not know, but one day I shall understand and then I will be satisfied."¹

That same living word dwells in us, waiting to awaken our souls. Take heart, get up, Jesus is calling us to follow him. Amen.

¹ Helen Keller obituary, <http://movies2.nytimes.com/learning/general/onthisday/bday/0627.html>