

Sermon for Sunday, October 28, 2018 - “Healing of Bartimaeus”

Reformation Sunday - Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost
October 28, 2018
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Pastor Marion Pruitt-Jefferson

Gospel: Mark 10:46-52

Beloved of God,
Grace and peace to you from our Jesus, our Savior.

This is a story about a desperate human being whose only means of survival is to sit in the gutter, at the side of the road, and cry out for mercy. It is a story for our time. A story that is intimately connected with all stories of human suffering and despair.

And it's a story about the power of God to transform human suffering – to bring people from hopelessness to unbounded joy; to lift people up from lives of desperation and futility and give them lives of purpose and meaning. And it is a story about the power of God to take away human blindness and open our eyes to the vision of God's love and justice for all creation.

As I prayed with and studied the story of Bartimaeus this past week, I thought about the thousands of desperate women and children and men crying out for mercy as they make their way north through Mexico to our southern border. I thought about a story Marty Steele and I heard earlier this month about what it was like to hold a 14-month old baby in a detention center in Texas – a child taken from her parents and placed in a for-profit prison run by our government. I thought about the immense humanitarian crisis taking place in war-torn Yemen where parents are crying out for mercy for their children – children who are dying by the hundreds each day. Like you, I watched as hatred and violence once again played out on our national stage in the horrific shooting at Tree of Life Synagogue and in the rash of politically motivated bombings.

What are we to do when the cries of our suffering world come at us from all directions and we feel overwhelmed? Maybe, like Bartimaeus, we just start by crying out to God for mercy. I know it's not Advent, yet, but I would also cry out, “Come Lord Jesus!” I would pray with the Prophet Isaiah, “Oh, that you would tear open the heavens and come down! Come and make right all that is so terribly wrong in our world.” And because I know that all the problems in the world are not just out there, but also in here, I would cry out for mercy for my hardness of heart ... mercy for lack of faith ... mercy for failure to live in love.

What did Jesus do when Jesus heard Bartimaeus' cries for mercy? Well, obviously Jesus healed him. But before that ... before that it says that Jesus stood still. That's remarkable because in Mark's gospel, Jesus is always on the move. One of Mark's favorite words to describe Jesus is 'immediately' – immediately Jesus did this or that, or went here or went there. Mark uses that word something like 42 times in his gospel. So it's noteworthy that when Jesus heard Bartimaeus, he stopped and stood still. Jesus stopped what he was doing, which was very important because he was on his way up to Jerusalem where he was going to give his life for the redemption of all creation. But Jesus stepped aside, stood still and listened to Bartimaeus' cry for mercy.

Maybe, like Jesus, when we hear all of those cries for mercy, we too need to stop and be still. Most of us are really good at doing lots of things and keeping busy. And especially when there are urgent needs, we can kick it into high gear and take care of business. And to be sure, God is at work in all of that.

But there is a deep humility in recognizing that it's not up to us to save the world. God has already done that in the death and resurrection of Jesus; and God continues that saving work everywhere that suffering and death and evil are present. When the needs of the world overwhelm us, there is deep humility in letting go, in standing still and recognizing our own need for God.

Our worship is just that sort of stopping point – that point of stillness in our over-full weeks. Here in this sacred place the sure and certain promises of God meet the needs of our suffering world and of our own lives. Here in our gathering together, in our singing and in our praying, in our greetings of Peace, and in our sharing in bread and wine we experience God's invitation to a deeper participation in love – love for God, love for one another, and love for our broken world.

Here we sing ancient words of hope - Those who sowed with tears, will reap with songs of joy! Those who go out weeping, carrying the seed, will come again with joy, shouldering their sheaves. (And again, I think about the Honduran migrants marching through Mexico, carrying their precious seeds of hope for a better tomorrow.)

Here we listen to the stories of Jesus and we see again that in Jesus the blind see, the hungry are filled, the prisoners are set free, and the dead are raised to new life.

Here, in our open and empty hands, we receive Jesus, who comes to us humbly, hidden in bread and wine. And only then, when we are filled with Jesus' endless life and unfailing love, are we sent back into the world set free to participate in all of God's saving and loving work - set free to bring people from hopelessness into joy; to lift people up from lives of desperation to lives of purpose and meaning; to share with all people the vision of God's love and compassion and justice for all creation.

Lord, Have Mercy.