

Sermon for Sunday, October 24, 2021- "Healed in Community"

Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

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Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

Bartimaeus is crying out for healing and others are trying to silence him. He is hurting, pleading for help, yet the crowd sternly orders him to be quiet.

I wonder why. Are they embarrassed by how desperate Bartimaeus sounds? Maybe they're uncomfortable that a beggar they've overlooked for so long is now making a scene. Do they wonder if he should even bother, will Jesus really help *him*?

Maybe Bartimaeus is not the only one in need of healing here. When have *you* felt like him - longing for healing, for change, for help? How have people around you responded? When have *you* felt like the crowd around Bartimaeus - uncomfortable with someone else's desperation, pretty sure pleas for help won't change anything?

This week, as I prayed with this story I was reminded of a time when I was embarrassed by a man's cries for healing, when I almost tried to silence him. I was a chaplain intern in a hospital after my first year of seminary. I was called to the room of a man who was dying of a brain tumor. He and his wife were praying for physical healing, for God to remove the tumor. They wanted me to join them. But the doctors and social worker were concerned that this couple was in denial. They wanted him to agree to hospice care and worried that if I prayed for healing, it would just prolong his denial and suffering.

The team was really persuasive. I also felt much more comfortable with them than I did with this strange couple. Their worldview, piety, and economic status was so very different from my own. I didn't want the medical team to think I was like those Christians. And I didn't really think God was going to heal this guy's brain tumor. Thankfully my chaplaincy supervisor was wise. "What might healing look like in this situation?", she wondered. And, "If you don't pray with them for healing will you be able to help them recognize the healing God does provide?" So, we prayed. We prayed for physical healing, for a miracle. We prayed a lot. I jumped in with both feet and prayed hard. Two weeks later, the man died. I didn't want to see the medical team that day.

Two months later, his wife came to find me at the hospital to tell me she was starting to see that there had been healing. As he was dying, she and her husband both felt so close to God. They felt God's presence with them in powerful ways. And she was starting to see that he had experienced the healing of a peaceful death. I almost got in the way of that experience for them. I almost missed seeing God's healing power at work. I, too, needed some serious help and healing. God worked through others to change my heart and open my eyes.

A similar thing happens in this story with Bartimaeus. The crowd around him needs healing. He's the one who is physically blind, but they are unable to really see him, to recognize his humanity. They're unable to see Jesus for who he is - the very face of God's justice and compassion. I love how Jesus responds. He stands still, taking it all in. Then he asks the crowd to call Bartimaeus to him. He asks the very people silencing Bartimaeus to acknowledge him and be part of his healing. And, as author Debbie Thomas points out, "Once the crowd sees Bartimaeus, they can't unsee him. Once Jesus opens their eyes to his full humanity, they must respond with compassion. [They say to him] 'Take heart; get up; he is calling you.'"¹ In this way, Jesus heals not only Bartimaeus but also the crowd. He heals their spiritual blindness.

We all have such need for healing in our bodies and spirits, our relationships, and communities. And God does heal us. Sometimes there is physical healing. I can't explain it and don't understand it, but sometimes it happens. Yet we experience healing in so many other ways as well. Healing happens when God directs our attention to the cries of people we have overlooked, when we realize that our own healing is connected to the well-being of others.

Healing happens in Christian community when we find we can come as we are with all our pain and brokenness. If you are like Bartimaeus longing for change, If you are like the crowd unsure that anything can change, there is a place for you. You don't need to have it all together, you don't need to be living your best life now. You are a valued member of the body of Christ just as you are.

Healing also happens as we pray. Prayer turns us toward our God who sees and hears us, and is so very close to us. Prayer points us to needs beyond ourselves and to a love far greater than our own. Prayer shapes us to be people who work for mercy, healing, and justice in the world. It isn't always easy to pray when we've cried to God for so long and don't feel like anything has changed, when we have no more words left, when God feels absent.

That's why we gather for worship. It's why we join congregations. In worship, in community others can pray on our behalf when we are too tired, sad, angry. In worship, we also experience the Holy Spirit, the One who intercedes for us, who prays for us with sighs too deep for words. When all you can do is sigh, know that the Spirit is praying within you.

In worship and Christian community, we also encounter people we might prefer to silence or ignore. We get to practice seeing and honoring those we find difficult so that we can do that out in the world.

In all of these ways and more, God heals us. Today, God sees you, and hears you, and heals you.

Let's take a moment for silent prayer.

¹ Debbie Thomas, "Let Me See Again", Journey with Jesus. <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/1988-let-me-see-again>