

Sermon on the Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost
St. James Episcopal Church
San Francisco, California
October 29, 2006
by The Rev. Mary Moore Gaines

Jeremiah 31:7-9; Psalm 126; Hebrews 7:23-28; Mark 10:46-52

Jesus asks Bartimaeus, What do you want me to do for you? Mark 10:50

This is arguably the very best story of healing, of seeing and of discipleship in the whole Bible. Three in one. It's got everything. First of all the blind beggar has a name – Bartimaeus. He's not a nameless 'rich young ruler.' He's not a nameless 'woman of the city.' He's not an unnamed woman who has been hemorrhaging for twelve years. Or an unnamed child seeking Jesus. He's not an anonymous thief of the cross next to Jesus. He's Bartimaeus!

The story is short, energetic, to the point, with strong players and a great climax, promising infinitely more to come. Jesus is leaving Jericho with a large noisy crowd following him. The blind beggar Bartimaeus who sitting by the side of the road hears Jesus coming. He begins to shout, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me." The people next to him try to shut him up, but he shouts even louder. Sure enough, Jesus stops and calls him to come. Bartimaeus 'springs up,' throws off his cloak, and goes. Jesus asks him, "What do you want me to do for you?" The blind man answers without hesitation, "My teacher, let me see again."

Jesus says to him, "Go, your faith has made you well." Immediately Bartimaeus regains his sight and then, he follows Jesus. That's the story. The very next verse in Mark's Gospel tells of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. Bartimaeus is following. The way will be the way of the cross. This fabulous story of healing, seeing and discipleship has ominous overtones of suffering and death and resurrection.

Walter Brueggemann, Old Testament scholar and teacher extraordinaire, reminds us that "The deep places in our lives – places of resistance and embrace – are not ultimately reached by instruction." They are reached as we move in and out of our biblical stories. Bishop Marc would say when we dance with the stories. The purpose of worship, teaching and instruction is to connect our lives with the central themes of human existence. The stories are one major way that we learn and grow in faith, in grace, in joy.

The connections between seeing and believing are so strong in the Gospel stories that these miracles worked through Jesus seem more about growing in faith than about regaining physical sight. Though Bartimaeus is sightless, he clearly sees who Jesus is. Seeing "who Jesus is" is the goal and gift of faith and is what leads us, by the grace of God, to real discipleship.

Real discipleship is, in short, loving God with all our hearts and loving our neighbor as ourselves. Perhaps we have heard this so often that we can no longer hear it. We are deaf to it. Perhaps we are saying to ourselves, “Yeah, yeah, but how does this translate into my own life?”

I propose that this morning we dialogue with the story to look into the question, “How does this story of Bartimaeus’ translate into real discipleship in my/our own life?” To do this we must engage directly, each and every one of us, with this story of Bartimaeus.

First, close your eyes and take three deep breaths, then hear Jesus asking you the question, “What do you want me to do for you?” Your answer may be on the tip of your tongue like Bartimaeus’ was, or you may want to ponder longer. Pay very close attention to your answer. Write it down somewhere, for your eyes only. Think about your answer in a month, six months, a year, five years. What has happened to you, your wish, your life? Will you see things differently? How will your priorities have changed?

Back to the story. Blind Bartimaeus throws off his cloak and goes to Jesus. Another scholar reminds us that beggars spread out their cloaks to receive alms. So when Bartimaeus throws away his cloak, he is throwing away his sole means of livelihood. With this bold act he shows his determination, his courage and his trust that something is going to change in his life.

Now, engage directly with this aspect of the story. Take a moment to think about what is your beggar’s cloak? What defines who you are, the identity you keep tightly wrapped around you? What would you have to let go of to allow real change, something radically new, in your life?

Shift the focus to the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion, posing the same question. “How does this story of Bartimaeus’ translate into real discipleship in the life of the church?” At the Diocesan Convention last Saturday, a priest of the Diocese said from the podium, “Let’s face it, the church is in decline.” Not news to anyone. Still, it was good to hear it spoken out loud.

Bartimaeus calls to, hollers at, Jesus. Jesus stops and bids him, “Come.” Bartimaeus jumps up, throws off his cloak, and goes.

It is more than plain that the Church must throw off the cloak of “We’ve always done it this way.” The cloak of, “We could never do that. It’s too ambitious, too risky, too big.” The cloak of “Those people ... they are different from us ... they would never want to be with us.”

Remember the old story about evangelism in the Episcopal Church? Evangelism consists in painting the church door red in hopes that like-minded people will

notice and come in!

In the most recent Grace Cathedral Quarterly, Alan Jones addresses the question, "What is spirituality?" He writes, "'Spirituality' today has degenerated into a question of technique: 'How do I find the meaning of life in ten easy lessons?'" Many of the techniques are for the raising of consciousness and some are very good. "But," Jones continues, "technique without conversion and commitment is not only useless but positively damaging. Technique without faith leaves a gaping hole."

"Traditionally, spirituality is the expression of a *faith*. It is based on a particular way of looking at the world, and this way of looking at the world depends on a series of sagas, stories, myths which give a picture of the reality in which we live."

Our 'seeing' happens when we treasure the stories, the art, the architecture, the music, the deeds of the faithful who found schools, churches, hospitals, who care for one another and reach out to their neighbors. So many of our national heroes have been grounded in their faith. Then there are the millions of faithful, not famous, who were and are constant in prayer, strong in love and faithful in the breaking of the bread. What a goodly heritage we celebrate!

We are in the midst of our Annual Giving season in which we make gifts and pledges to support our operating budget for the year ahead. As you ponder Jesus' question "What do you want me to do for you?" And, as you ponder how to throw off the cloak which is hampering your growth in faith and grace, also ponder deeply what this community, this Church of St. James means to you and how fully, among all the other financial demands and opportunities before you, you will support who we are, what we are doing and what we are becoming.

We have challenged each other to increase our pledge this year by 10% to fully fund our budget. A good number of early pledgers have responded to the call. We hope that all remaining givers can and will do likewise. If you are a new pledger, just pledge 10% more than you thought you might!

It is becoming more and more obvious that the Community Center at St. James, while now a work in progress, will be the future of St. James for the next 50-100 years. We will be a model not only for churches in the diocese but for churches across the United States and abroad. A model of how a church, a school and a community center, a trinity of non-profits, can partner to provide a place with programs and activities where people of all faiths and traditions can come together to learn and grow in body, mind and spirit, so that this corner of our wide, wide world will be a better place for all.

From corners of the world like ours, peace with justice will grow and flourish. We are doing a new thing here at St. James. The Church is the founding partner.

We see the future.

The challenge for us is, that seeing our future, we respond with the courage, the determination and the trust of Bartimaeus.

Jesus asks Bartimaeus, "What do you want me to do for you?"