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Grace Episcopal Church, Alexandria, VA

Sunday, Proper 25, Year B, Track 2

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

Now, O Lord, take my lips and speak through them; Take our minds and think through them; Take our hearts and set them on fire with love for You. Amen.

I'm afraid I must start with a small confession. I may have only been Anglican for 10 years but as any proper Anglican does, I love our hymns. And so, whilst preparing this sermon, I stumbled upon *Amazing Grace*. Quite honestly, that hymn never ceases to move me, amaze me. Particularly the verse: 'How precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed', what a wonderful introduction to today's gospel reading that would be. In this reading from the 10th chapter of Mark, we are presented with yet another powerful image of God's grace, redemption, and healing for those who risk professing faith in Jesus Christ. It is, indeed, by God's grace alone and through our continuous sustenance in the Holy Spirit that we live, move and have our being. Today we learn that by faith in Jesus Christ, our lives are being constantly renewed, made whole, and holy.

In Mark's chapter 10, Jesus' Galilean ministry and his journey southward are over. He is now in Jericho in Judea, arguably the world's oldest continually inhabited town dating back to 8,000 BCE, some 15 miles away from Jerusalem. And on the cusp of his jubilant entry into the site of his future passion, we are to see again, with slightly clearer vision, both who Jesus is, and what it means to be his disciples.

The story of Bartimaeus, at first sight, appears to be a regular healing miracle story. And yet many scholars have pointed out that there are a number of intricate details that do not neatly fit that type of a genre. Nowhere else in the Gospel of Mark, is the person who is healed

actually named, or even allowed to join Jesus on the journey. So instead, we believe that the heart of this passage may, in fact, speak to what it means to be a disciple of Jesus, how do we 'follow him on the way', as we hear in verse 52.

There were surely many beggars sitting on the pilgrim route from Jericho to the temple of Jerusalem. One of them was Bartimaeus, probably blind from birth. Bartimaeus knew his place. He sat at the roadside, constantly living on the margin. He experienced a lifetime of indignities. We often associate begging with humiliation, suffering, misfortune, loneliness, perhaps even despair.

In Jesus' time though, being blind was probably further associated with sinfulness and uncleanness. People might have seen blindness as a sign of God's curse for ill behaviour. So Bartimaeus, just like the haemorrhaging woman in chapter 5, were the outcasts of society, literally the dirt of the street. Isn't it interesting that both of these characters of incredible faith are presented to us as living somewhere below everyone's gaze? And so, begging for people's mercy was the only way of their survival and sustenance.

But, just like the haemorrhaging woman, when Bartimaeus heard of Jesus of Nazareth passing by, his heart was immediately filled with this incredible faith and hope that compelled him to cry out and shout: 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me'. Bartimaeus may have been poor and destitute but his heart was rich in faith and hope. He called on God and a miracle took place!

But perhaps even more important than the miracle is the fact that this is the very first time in the whole Gospel of Mark that Jesus's true messianic identity is publicly revealed without Jesus trying to suppress the message by telling everyone not to say anything to others. For any Jew of Jesus' time, Bartimaeus' annunciation: 'Jesus, Son of David' was indisputably linked to the idea of a Messiah. They would all have had very vivid recollections of the Psalm of Solomon 17:21: 'Raise up for them their king, the son of David, at the time which you have

chosen, O God, to reign over Israel your servant'. And it is also perhaps in line with this event that the crowd then greets Jesus entering Jerusalem with the words: 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed in the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!' Finally, Bartimaeus' cry is a revelation of Jesus' identity, comparable to Peter's confession in chapter 8:29.

So, here we have a clear recognition by the roadside beggar of Jesus as the Messiah and yet, the disciples 'sternly ordered him to be quiet', as we read in verse 48. Let us just pause on this verse for a second. They indeed took him for that 'dirt of the street'. 'What makes you even think that you can talk to the Teacher! Go away!' That's what they would have probably said. Last week, we heard in chapter 10:13-14: 'People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw it, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs"

Mark consistently humbles us in showing who the true disciples of Christ are and how, from the perspective of the Kingdom, our worldly statuses are devoid of meaning. 'Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first', we heard last week from chapter 10:31. And so perhaps, it is then of no surprise that many scholars have come to see Bartimaeus and not the sons of Zebedee who wanted to sit on Christ's right and left hand in glory, as the archetype of a disciple. Humble but bold, persistent and eager to leave behind whatever he has for the sake of the kingdom.

Finally, everything stops, and all eyes are on this sensational man, who refuses to be defined by his debilitating condition. He knows that he's so much more than the illness that afflicted him. He could have given up, lost hope, gave in to despair. But instead, he decided to go boldly, fight for his dignity, search for healing and spiritual wholeness. His faith pushes him forward and demands attention.

And so, when Jesus stood still and said: “Call him here”, he didn’t think twice and ‘throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus’. His leaving behind his only earthly possession, on which he probably sat every day and that covered him from the cold every night, is further analogues to the widow who contributed ‘her whole livelihood’ to the service of God in the temple (12:44). But his faith becomes even more pronounced, when still blind he jumps up and probably pushing through the crowds, bumping into people, yet trusting that God will lead him, he walks toward Jesus.

His risk paid off. The one who spent a whole life living on the margins of society has not only been restored to health but also invited into the community of disciples. Jesus invites him onto the way of the cross and the resurrection. In a split second, and in effect of this wonderfully intimate encounter between God incarnate and a human being, he’s no longer an outcast but a beloved child of God, whom Jesus restores into the joy of belonging. In the eyes of the world, he might have been the dirt of the street, but God’s eyes penetrated to the depths of her heart and soul. The one who couldn’t see was finally seen. For God, our human dignity and beauty never fade. God’s love for us demands nothing but delights in our faith that then informs all our actions.

I believe that in this miraculous story, God calls us to go boldly, to never give up, to keep the faith, and to strive forward knowing that in God’s eyes we’re precious and beautiful even in spite of any shortcomings and inhibitions. Faith, in the Gospel of Mark, is often defined as fortitude that entails bold and gutsy action. That faith is rooted in our conviction that God will bless us, make us whole and fill us with his peace. And though it is the way of the cross that Jesus invited Bartimaeus, it is also the way of the resurrection.

Let us, therefore, root ourselves once more in God and pray in the words of Saint Augustine: ‘Let us follow you, O Christ, as our pattern: offering you for our ransom, receiving you as our Eucharistic food, and waiting for you as our endless and exceeding great reward.’ Amen.