

October 28, 2018
Columbia Congregational Church
23rd Sunday after Pentecost
Psalm 34: 1-8, Mark 10: 46-52

Light in the Darkness
Sermon by the Reverend Betsey Polglase

I wasn't going to preach on this passage from the Gospel of Mark. I didn't want to wrestle with Jesus' statement to blind Bartimaeus that his faith had made him well. This has been a hard week for many of us and the idea of just having enough faith could set things straight didn't set well with me. And yet Jesus' words continued to push me. God wouldn't let me ignore them. So this is me wrestling. Who hasn't called out to God for help for ourselves or a loved one that we, or they, be healed of some ailment?

My older daughter while in high school had a close friend whose mother had cancer. The mother was very religious and attended Mass regularly, went to healing services, and prayed earnestly for healing. By all accounts she had faith. Family members went with her to Mass and the healing services and many prayed too. But she still died within a year's time. Was her faith not adequate? Did God turn God's back on her? These were the questions going through my daughter's mind and her friends concern.

When I was a teen one of my best friends hit a rebellious stage and was headed for trouble. She mocked my faith and the faith of her parents. I prayed and prayed that God would transform her. The only thing that happened was we were no longer friends. Perhaps you too

have worried about some one and petitioned God on their behalf, but saw no change.

So when we read this passage where blind Bartimaeus regains his sight and Jesus says, “Your faith has made you well,” how are we supposed to respond? Bartimaeus had become a beggar because he could no longer see or work. He had become an outcast, dependent on the kindness of others at a time when illness was considered the result of sin. He sat on the roadside outside the city of Jericho calling out to passers-by for help so he could survive. The only thing he could call his own was his cloak which was as essential for his survival. This he threw off when he put his life in Jesus’ hands.

When Bartimaeus hears that Jesus is passing by he immediately cries out to him, “Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me!” Jesus asks what Bartimaeus wants and when he asks to see again, presto his sight is returned. Jesus says, “Go; your faith has made you well.” What is it with this?

My former sister-in-law, when she felt ignored or unworthy of attention or consideration would say, “What am I? Chopped liver?” Now you may like liver, but I can think of nothing edible that is so vile. The only time my mother would fix a separate dinner for my sisters and me was when she fixed liver and onions for my dad and her. For me, thinking of myself as chopped liver was lower than low. Oh yuck!

So God, what am I? Chopped liver? My prayers not worthy of your saving grace for my friend, my daughter’s friend’s mother, for my husband?

This kind of thinking happens when we just pull a small section out of scripture and we take the words more literally.

John Dominic Crossan (born February 17, 1934^[1]) is an Irish-American New Testament scholar, historian of early Christianity, and former Catholic priest. He writes,

“My point, once again, is not that those ancient people told literal stories and we are now smart enough to take them symbolically, but that they told them symbolically and we are now dumb enough to take them literally.” If we take this Jesus’ words in this passage literally, we can get lost.

So let’s take a moment to look at this morning’s passage. It less about being healed of an ailment and more about gaining new vision, new insight, and about discipleship. Mark uses this story to close a particular section of his gospel that has been explaining discipleship. You may remember a couple of weeks ago I spoke about the beginning of this section that tells of Jesus restoring sight to another man. This first time, it took two attempts by Jesus before the man could see clearly (8:22-26). The rest of the section contains Jesus 3 predictions of his coming suffering, the favored three disciples experience of Jesus’ transfiguration, and teachings on discipleship and the kingdom of God. The disciples understanding is gradual, even slow. So, the first time Jesus gives sight to a blind man we see that it is a process. Sometimes we only dimly see, but with God’s help we can become good disciples as our vision, our understanding clears.

As long as we live in this world, our ability to see is often clouded. I don’t think we are promised an easy life when we do our best to be faithful. In fact, Jesus warned his disciples of coming persecution and experiencing dreadful things before the kingdom of God is fully realized. However,

Jesus promises to be with us, giving us courage and strength for the battles we each must face. In the midst of the darkness, which sometimes seems to be in control of the world, there is Light, the Light of Christ, which will guide us in our days. It is faith in God, in Christ, the light, and in the Holy Spirit that gets us through the troubles of the world and the troubles in our personal lives.

Bartimaeus was the son of Timaeus and one would assume that he was loved by his earthly father and yet he was a beggar, an outcast, a homeless man. Was he literally blind (some speculate he had cataracts) or figuratively blind? Were his eyes damaged or had he turned his back on the faith of his father, so lost in the darkness that comes when we wander in this world absorbed in our selves, distant from the Holy One?

I hear similarities to the story of the Prodigal Son who went off to live with wild abandon, away from the constraints of his father, only to discover he had lost everything especially his self-respect. Bartimaeus too had hit bottom, as they say, and cried out for help and put his faith in Jesus, Son of David, Son of God.

One last point I want to make. The word for “well” as in “your faith has made you well,” is more appropriately translated as “Whole”, as in “your faith has made you whole.” To be well means to us without ailments. To be whole means having inner peace. The entire section in Mark is about discipleship, about having faith in the Light in the midst of the darkness, that is faith in Jesus. By turning to Jesus – perhaps for the 100th time, we are made whole, even though we may still have a disease such as cancer or failing sight or lungs. By God’s grace we are made whole.

Like the psalmist, we are able to praise God, share the good news, know that God hears us and makes us whole even as we live in a world of

much darkness. Our faith tells us only God can grant us peace in the midst of turmoil.

Let us pray,
Holy God, give us hearts to see and understand and follow. Be our teacher and our healer. Open us to your grace that we may be whole. Give us light in the darkness. Amen.