



SUNDAY SERMON

BELONGING TO GOD

When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!". Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" (Mark 10:47-48).

The blind beggar, Bartimaeus, makes an insistent claim for God's mercy that neither Jesus, nor we, can ignore. On recent Sundays, the gospel of Mark has taken us throughout Galilee, where news about Jesus is spreading. In today's parlance we might say Jesus' fame has "gone viral" as he performs healing miracles, reaches out to the poor with compassion, and proclaims the coming of God's kingdom.

There is tension in the air. Palestine is a Roman colony where the threat of public strife is just the surface of everyday life. Peasant farmers are overtaxed and forced into servitude while privileged elites look the other way. A hostile government treats the Jewish populace with disdain, while leaders of the temple seem to be complicit with the oppressors.

To rescue the nation, some look to violence and revolution led by self-proclaimed prophets. Some look to a Messiah who will come to serve as a divinely-installed king. Discord, upheaval, even war seem like imminent prospects to those living in this anxious, uneasy setting.

We live today in an anxious, uneasy nation. The specter of hate and savage violence that lurks beneath the surface of modern American life burst forth again in yesterday's senseless shooting at a Pittsburgh synagogue. Meanwhile, divisions over how our country is being led are sharper than ever. Anger and anxiety stir among many who see justice being undermined by those in power. Provocation and mistrust dominate our civic discourse. In the past week the prospect of domestic terrorism has ramped up the stress.

And yet in the midst of the tension and brokenness of the first century and of the 21st, people look to divine love and mercy to provide hope and comfort. One of the challenges of a life of faith is discerning when God's mercy is in our midst, and how it can change our world and the way we live. Jesus embodies God's mercy and invites people to a new way of life. Blind Bartimaeus recognizes it more clearly than most.

Crowds of people follow Jesus, thrilled at his miraculous powers. But they struggle to understand who he is. His closest friends are slow to comprehend what it means to be his disciple. In last Sunday's gospel, James and John ask Jesus to let them sit beside him in places of honor when his reign begins, revealing how little they grasp Jesus' message that the last will be first and the first will be last.

continued

DATE

Pentecost 23

Sunday, Oct. 28, 2018

PREACHER

The Rev. David Griswold

Mark 10:46-52

St. Columba's
EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Jericho is the final stop before Jesus reaches Jerusalem. He has tried to prepare the disciples for the suffering and death that awaits him. But as they head for the holy city, they are still caught up in the excitement of traveling with this remarkable celebrity. No one is paying attention to the blind beggar by the side of the road. The locals are used to seeing him there, asking for coins or scraps of food.

Jesus' friends, though taught by Jesus to serve the poor, do not pause to offer to help either. It doesn't occur to them that this outcast could have anything to contribute to their understanding of Jesus. They and we find it hard to imagine the world from where Bartimaeus sits. Burdened by both poverty and physical blindness, he lives in isolation. He relies on the tolerance and the pity of others just to survive, and he hovers on the sidelines of community life.

Bartimaeus seeks more than coins and food on this day. His eyesight might be compromised but his heart is attuned to the approach of God—the God who will embrace his humanity and restore him to wholeness. He seeks not only a change in life circumstances but a new way of living. When Jesus walks by, Bartimaeus knows he is in the presence of the Holy, and at long last it is time to claim God's blessing.

And so he cries out to Jesus not once but twice, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" He affirms Jesus' sacred lineage and trusts in his power to bestow God's most precious gift: mercy. But what does Bartimaeus mean by mercy? What does this term mean to us? For years I've prayed for it in worship to acknowledge my dependence on God for forgiveness and strength. While the God of justice reminds me of my duty to be a loving person, I've thought of mercy as the reassuring softer side of God that forgives me for falling short.

But on a deeper level divine mercy offers more than forgiveness for wrongs done or compassion in times of pain. Mercy is the fundamental characteristic through which God relates to us—an inexhaustible store of empathy for the human condition. Its origin in Hebrew suggests that mercy is God's steadfast love for all, touching every place of our brokenness, flowing from God's readiness to cherish us as we are. Mercy is the unmerited, surprising and perpetual gift of belonging to God.

Prophets remind the faithful to emulate God's mercy in the way we treat the poor and powerless. Jesus models the mercy of God for those around him and for us through acts of compassion and tenderness that transcend human definitions of justice and merit.

Jesus tells his followers to call Bartimaeus forward. Recognizing that mercy is at hand, Bartimaeus springs to his feet and throws off his cloak—perhaps his most prized possession-- in order to get close to Jesus. And in this unstable corner of the Roman Empire, Jesus performs another miracle that exemplifies what is possible in God's kingdom.

Bartimaeus is not the first person to receive a miraculous healing in Mark's gospel. But he is the first and only healed person who is given a name. Mark wants us to remember the story not only because of what it reveals about Jesus but because of what it has to say about discipleship.

Jesus tells Bartimaeus that his faith has made him well. I've often found this teaching difficult to accept because it seems to defy my experience of reality. Life has shown us that faith alone doesn't make diseases go away or erase the challenges and injustices of the world. Yet Bartimaeus is made well not only because his physical blindness is healed but because his keen spiritual vision has led him to God.

Touched by mercy and drawn into relationship with Jesus, this new disciple doesn't go his own way. He follows Jesus on the way to Jerusalem to join the work of building God's kingdom and spreading God's mercy. Bartimaeus knows he belongs to God now, and his identity bears the imprint of God.

And surely ours does too. As faithful followers of Jesus we also experience God's mercy, but it is hard to go Jesus' way and not our own. To go Jesus' way means being attentive to cries for mercy from the side of the road we travel and making God's presence and compassion known to those who have been made outcasts.

To go Jesus' way also means being ready to call out for God's mercy when we feel isolated and overwhelmed. Mercy becomes real when we see, hear and feel it in the caring spirit of people around us, often when we most need and least expect it. Deepening our capacity to be merciful is essential if we are to be the peacemakers Jesus would have us be-- in our families and work places and in our communities and country.

I'm blessed to be part of a community that asks for God's mercy and is moved to share it in an anxious and angry world. In every aspect of our life together-- pastoral care, social justice ministry, prayer and fellowship circles—we have an opportunity to discover and make known to others the power of God's mercy. And together we, like Bartimaeus, can be disciples who make Jesus' way our own.

Amen.