

*Flute: Plays the melody of hymn 587*

Text: Jesus asked Bartimaeus, "What do you want me to do for you?"

As I reviewed the previous sermons I have written on this morning's scripture lesson, I always wrote from the perspective of how we respond when we are Bartimaeus and need Jesus's healing. This time I found myself being called to preach from the perspective of the healer and not the healed; i.e., from the perspective of Jesus. I found myself called to remind us that WE are Jesus now. . . . *I found myself called to remind us that WE are Jesus now.* I remind us that when Jesus called the Church into being, he called it to incarnate him: Jesus called the church into being to be his face, his hands, his presence, his love; he called it into being to BE, as he was, love made flesh, and thus to do the work of God—healing creation—until it is finished. This is what it means to be an incarnational community. From the beginning this has been the Church's mission. To my knowledge Jesus has not changed it.

Dolce sings verse one of hymn 587:  
*Through all the world, a hungry Christ  
must scavenge far for daily bread,  
must beg the rich for crumb and crust.  
We are the rich, the daily fed.*

From the beginning we have been called to be an incarnational community. Today's scripture lesson is ideal for putting flesh on that. Bartimaeus, a blind man who sat by the road side and begged for crumb and crust in order to eat, has been at some time or other a central part of the prayer life of literally millions of people. One reason for this is that he is one of the few people in the gospels who was healed whose name we know: there is something about knowing someone's name that gives us a deeper sense of connection than we would feel otherwise. Second, the story is profound in its utter simplicity: with no embellishment Mark tells a story that forces us to flesh it out on our own—with our own stories.

It's not easy being someone like Bartimaeus. You are the person, society believes and religion teaches, who God is punishing for sin. You are pariah. You are the rejected of God. You are thus relegated by society to begging and suffering the various cruel injustices and vulnerabilities to which blind beggars are subject. Imagine what it was like to go out, day after day, simply sitting by the roadside, listening for people to come by, and beg—for food, money, even a scrap of clothing. What made it worse was that you had to beg from people who thought you *deserved* it. God was punishing you after all; why else would you be sick? It's odd how people respond when they believe someone is the despised of God. Most young men who seek out gays to hurt, and even murder, are church-going folk, who have been told by their clergy that homosexuals are the despised of God. Here is a good place to vent one's rage in safety: you can hate, and even kill, while feeling virtuous. This is exactly the kind of situation that Bartimaeus faced: he was in the position of begging from people who treated him with scorn at best, with violence at worst.

One must wonder that must be like hearing, but not seeing, people approach and never knowing their intent. Can you tell their intent from the quality of their footfall while never seeing

their face and body language? Are they going to give you something to eat? Or are they going to ignore you? Is it youths who may beat you? Or is it a clergyman who will preach to you about your sin? Such forced vulnerability it is to sit by the roadside and beg like that. Bartimaeus must have hated his life: hated where he was, hated what he was doing, hated the fact that he couldn't see, literally and figuratively, any way out of the mess he was in.

*Beyond the church, a leper Christ  
takes each untouchable by hand,  
gives hope to those who have no trust,  
whose stigma is our social brand.*

What is startling to me is that as the healthcare debate in our nation rages—and 'rages' is an apt word for the tenor and texture of some of this debate—what startles me is that so many of the personalized stories we read about in newspapers and magazines have many of the same themes as does this personalized story from Mark's gospel: suffering from illness, crippled financially because of it, hoping for help from others when personal resources are exhausted, living in fear, feeling like, and perhaps even being, a beggar, a pariah. One personalized story really got me, and it wasn't even that bad. A man told of his wife's illness. She was in her mid fifties when it struck. She was a teacher with great benefits and adequate pay. Then she got a disease that left her thoroughly and permanently disabled. He related how she lost her job and therefore health insurance; she lost her insurance when she needed it the most. Her blessing was that she was married to this man who had a job and he moved her onto his benefits. In one regard a happy ending, but it made him realize that if she were single, or if he loses his job, or if anything happens to him, she would face total ruin; he fears dying before her. Her medical expenses are astronomical, and her income is absolute zero. His words chilled me to the bone when he said that his wife, after being a responsible citizen and a hardworking woman all her life, under the current system lost her employer-provided health coverage when she needed it most. As this man told his story he said it was then that he realized that he could not be a passive observer of our nation's healthcare debate. He said that he would work to find a solution that transcended politics and that cared for people, and that did not abandon them when they needed help and community the most.

*We do not know you, beggar Christ.  
We do not recognize your sores.  
We do not see for we are blind,  
forgive us, touch us, make us yours.*

A solution that transcends politics. As I listen to this healthcare debate I have not heard one voice, not one, who does not admit that the current delivery system in the United States is broken: from the tens of millions uninsured to those who have pre-existing conditions and are denied coverage, from the elderly who have to choose between whether to buy food or medications to the suddenly unemployed in a tanking economy, the system is broken. I have not heard anyone disagree with that. But oh my, there is vociferous debate how to fix it, vociferous debate that has at times deteriorated to the vituperative. In the remaining few minutes of a Sunday morning sermon I would love to lay out for you the magic solution that will solve this for the entire nation. But seeing how I don't have time (that would take an entire half hour), I will

instead, as the pastor of this Body of Christ, frame a few observations that I hope will spark thoughtful response, dialogue and engagement.

If we are, as a gathered Body of Christ, the incarnation of Jesus' love and presence on earth, the most obvious question, then, is how did Jesus respond to people in need of healthcare then and how does that inform how we shape our response today? In that spirit I ask you to hold in your heart the following regarding Jesus' ministry to those in need of healing:

He did not turn anyone away who asked for help and healing.

He responded with focused compassion each and every time.

He ministered particularly to those who were least able to pay for a doctor.

He recognized that sin, that is to say, alienation, is a factor in illness.

His healing of others depended on people participating in healing themselves.

He understood that some needed physical healing, and others mental and spiritual healing.

He could not heal everyone.

Some people refused to be healed.

He did not treat health as a commodity.

Healing of body, mind or spirit, was an integral part of his larger vision of a restored creation.

As I reviewed the previous sermons I have written on this morning's text, I realized I always wrote from the perspective of how we respond when we are Bartimaeus and need Jesus's healing. This time I found myself being called to preach from the perspective of the healer and not the healed; i.e., from the perspective of Jesus. I found myself called to remind us that WE are Jesus now, remind us that when Jesus called the Church into being, he called it to incarnate him: Jesus called the church into being to be his face, his hands, his presence, his love; he called it into being to BE, as he was, love made flesh, and thus to do the work of God—healing creation— until it is finished. This is what it means to be an incarnational community. From the beginning this has been the Church's mission. To my knowledge Jesus has not changed it.

Amen and amen.

The Rev. George C. Anastos

Pastoral Prayer

Perfect Light, you create light in the shadows of the world and light in the confusion of our thoughts. You lighten the heaviness of our spirits. With the radical word of prophecy, you lighten the burdens of powerlessness. You act through prophets and judges to show us the way which leads to holiness and maturity.

Just as your servant Jesus healed the physical blindness of Bartimaeus and of the man of Bethsaida; so grant that we may be healed of our inward blindness so that we may walk always as people enlightened by your continual offer of health, to us and to all the world.

Perfect Light, inspire us to rest confidently in your healing promise given us through the life of Jesus and through the lives of his disciples. Thus, dispose us to cherish your word and accept the invitation to follow your Son so that our every thought and deed may be blessed to bring closer the time of your reign. Amen.

## WISDOM

By Janet Hartley Humphreys

“It is possible to live a full life with a scarred body, but it’s virtually impossible to generate a life force with a despairing spirit”

Wisdom or that core of one’s being that expresses health is usually an accumulation of life’s instruction, most often gained through an active participation in the process of living. I must live my own life experience with as much integrity and authenticity, love and trust as I can muster. I may choose an attitude of willingness to look at ways of coping that enhance my sense of well-being or I may choose not to.

My journey has taken me through the trials and pitfalls of coping with a long term chronic, progressive, neurological condition called Parkinson’s.

Illness offers one a dangerous opportunity. It offers the danger of being attached to illness, of defining yourself by your illness. (so you use it to withdraw from encountering self and others). For me, keeping a journal and writing poetry have served as effective coping strategies that have helped me transcend my body’s frailties. Poetry has a way of helping me to identify the feelings I was having over the losses I was experiencing; grief, rage, sadness, and always happiness and laughter.

I tried to be aware of what was going on around me. Keeping most of my interests from before my diagnosis, specifically writing, nursing and my family. I hope you can hear the sense of joy and celebration I feel for all of life. I am grateful to God for the language of poetry; for rhyme, rhythm and song; for laughter, wonder and awe. I wanted to explore what I might still be. Writing and contemplation are part of this discernment. The possibility of transformation exists.

I have no magic solutions. I only hope my willingness to share what my experience has been like can help others do the same. We learn from each other. In the struggle to live a meaningful, authentic life, even though I have a condition sometimes difficult to manage, I have gained a sense that healing is different from cure. We all have to find our own way, seek our own path, but we can choose to include others along the way. We do not have to “go it alone”. This is what support groups are about. Talking about our experience can help our friends and families better understand what is going on with us and what our choices are within the context of this condition.

“It is possible to live a full life with a scarred body, but it’s virtually impossible to generate a life force with a despairing spirit.”

Janet Humphreys-2008