

St. John's, Albany

18 October 2015

21 Pentecost - B

Isaiah 53:4-12

Hebrews 5:1-10

Mark 10:35-52

The text for the sermon comes the healing of blind Bartimaeus from our reading today:

*Jesus stood still and said, 'Call him here.' And they called the blind man, saying to him, 'Take heart; get up, he is calling you.' So throwing off his cloak he sprang up and came to Jesus.*

*Then Jesus said to him, 'What do you want me to do for you?' The blind man said to him, 'My teacher, let me see again.' Jesus said to him, 'Go; your faith has made you well.'*

*Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.*

This story of blind Bartimaeus is appointed for the 22th Sunday after Pentecost. So it would be next week's gospel, except that instead, we will celebrate Reformation Sunday. So we'd end up missing this story and I didn't want us to.

Also, the nice thing about combining it with this week's gospel is that we get examples of two different kinds of requests made of Jesus: The first request is when James and John ask Jesus for an honored place for themselves in the glory of the world to come. Jesus refuses that request. The second request is when blind Bartimaeus will not be silenced and asks Jesus to restore his sight. This is the request that Jesus honors.

Look at the difference between these two requests. The first--the one James and John make--is about status. It's a request for status within what they assume will be heaven's hierarchy. It's not about the here and now of their life here on earth, but about life in the world to come. It's also a request that, if promised, could lead to their passivity in the life they're living now. It seems as though James and John are asking for preferential seating for no other apparent purpose than that of honor. Or vanity. Won't they look good sitting in all glory at the right and left sides of Jesus!

Blind Bartimaeus' request differs in all respects. It is not a request about status within a hierarchy in heaven. Rather, it is a request about equal participation in the community of which he is currently a marginalized member because of his blindness. His is not a request about the afterlife; it is a request for a fuller life in the present, not the future tense. The fulfillment of his request will lead, not to passivity, but to activity as he engages, with restored, renewed vision—in all sense of that word “vision”—in the life of faith.

I like contrasting these stories because they illustrate for us the difference between entitlement and engagement.

That sounds like an academic distinction, I know. But think of it this way:

When I was in graduate school at the University of Virginia I taught a course on Shakespeare's plays. So this student comes to me after I've graded and returned his first paper. I had given him a B-. He tells me he wants to do better. He took the Shakespeare class because he'd seen a Shakespeare play once and liked it very much. But now he finds he sometimes he gets so lost in the rich and confusing language that he misses the actual plot of the play. He asks me how he can get better at reading this stuff so that he'll be able to better understand both the plot and the language.

Now, I'm sure we've got some teachers in the sanctuary. You know that this is the kind of student you want to spend time with because this is the kind of student who wants to engage in the learning process. He or she will be the richer for it and enrich your life as a teacher, as well.

Then I had another student come to me after I'd graded and returned his first paper. He, too, had gotten a B-, same as the first student. Ms. Page, I can't get a B-, he tells me. Well, it's a B- paper, I tell him. But I'm happy to work with you about ways to improve your work for the next paper.

He decides not to take me up on my offer. Instead he just says to me, I can't get a B-. I'm taking this course so it will look good on my transcript for when I go to law school. I can't have a grade in the B-range.

So I said to him, Hey, it's only the first paper. There's a whole semester of learning ahead of you. You'll have time to get that grade up as you hone your reading and writing skills. And—you can guess what happened. The kid somehow figured he was entitled to an A. And I had denied his entitlement. So he dropped my class.

Can you see how James and John were a bit like that? And I mean, it's typical of human nature to be that way. Sometimes we believe we are entitled to good things and happiness as long as we don't have to do any soul-searching or part with anything we don't want to give up along the way. Even though James and John were disciples and we tend to think of the disciples as good guys, it still didn't keep two of them from pressing Jesus about what was really a matter of little immediate consequence or importance. No wonder the other disciples, when they caught wind of what James and John were asking, got angry at them. Then there was a quarrel, conflict ensured. And Jesus must have been thinking, "oh, brother, not this again!" when he tells them, "Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all."

Now, though, consider Bartimaeus:

Bartimaeus was in trouble; he was living a disadvantaged life because of his disability. But he had the wisdom to recognize his need for healing. And he also recognized that healing would require him to face and embrace change. Now—even the change we desire is never without its drawbacks. No change is all positive. Still, Bartimaeus calls out to Jesus insistently, his recognition of his need for healing so great that he will not be silenced. He simply must engage with Jesus. He knows he's not entitled to anything at all. But he wants Jesus to hear him. And he wants to see Jesus.

I think that, as humans, we are challenged to appreciate the difference between the posture of entitlement that James and John represent in today's gospel and the posture of engagement of Bartimaeus represents. Because, you know, it can be tempting to give in to the part of us that feels entitled: entitled to others' sympathy, others' services, and others' esteem. I'll repeat the Woody Allen joke I told you a couple of weeks ago. He says, "So there are two women at a Catskill mountain resort. And one of them says, "Wow, the food at this place is really terrible."

And the other woman says, "Yeah, I know! And such small portions!"

Living with a sense of entitlement is easy. But in the end, it's lazy.

The contrasting stories of the request made by James and John and the request made by blind Bartimaeus give us, I think, a pretty good clue of where God's will and Christ's love are most active. That is, of course, in the story of Bartimaeus. It's Bartimaeus' clarity about his broken-ness and his willingness to be changed that lead him into true vision and a true engagement with the life he has ahead of him in the here and now.

Now--when I think of Jesus' patience with the inappropriateness of the request made by James and John, I like to believe that God is patient with us, too, when we lead our lives as if we are entitled to something,

whether that be wealth without sharing, power without justice, complaints without changes or forgiveness without contrition.

I like to believe that God is patient with us, but just like Jesus in the story of James and John, I don't think God values or indulges our self-centered senses of entitlement. I like to believe that God waits--maybe with divinely bated breath--for us to decide to lead lives of engagement, rather than of entitlement.

But what I like even better than believing that God is patient when we screw up is imagining the look on Jesus' face--and on Bartimaeus' face--when Bartimaeus' rises with vision restored and a new pathway open before him. What will happen next?

All those healing stories in the Bible, those healing stories we love to read—the raising of Lazarus, the curing of the Syrophenician woman's daughter, the healing of the woman with the flow of blood, the unstoppering of the deaf man's ears, the healing of the centurion's servant—we love those stories because in them people are made whole. But we never really stop to think: What will happen next? What do healed people go on to do?

What did Lazarus do after he was unbound from the grave cloths? Who did the Syrophenician's daughter grow up to be? How did the woman who was no longer bleeding go on to live her life and what did the formerly deaf man hear? What did the Roman soldier's servant do? How did the people healed by Jesus change their lives? What did blind Bartimaeus with his renewed sight, look out and see?

These healing stories invite us to ask the questions: restored, healed, made whole, what do we do next? And I believe that each week at the communion table, we leave restored, healed, made whole and called to consider: what do we do next?

Today, at our meeting, as the body of Christ assembled at St. John's, we are called to consider: what do we do next?

We are the healed. And the healed know that change is inevitable. And we know that change, even the best of change, involves loss, disappointment, a re-orienting of how we know the world to be. Jesus never intended to endorse the status quo. And we can't cling to it. But we can pray for the right use our gifts and our talents and our resources so that we can make the body of Christ alive in the world not simply within the walls of St. John's, but in the world around us as God shows us the means to do that. And so we can pray for God's good guidance. We can trust that God will guide us. Because God always has—through loss, through change, through renewal.

And so we ask, how do we, saved by grace and healed by Jesus, change our lives? Well, remember blind Bartimaeus. He is our teacher today. He saw more blind than James and John saw walking alongside Jesus all those months:

He saw his need for healing. He saw the need to ask for that healing, to seek help where help was to be found. He saw that he would be able to be a full participant once his sight was restored. He saw a vision of what his life could be like---all he could offer to the world, even if he wasn't sure what that would mean. And Jesus healed him.

I know that I want to be like Bartimaeus, wise enough to know when I need renewal or healing, bold enough to ask for it, receptive enough to let God give me vision and visionary enough to trust my sight to God. I hope you want to be like that visionary Bartimaeus, too.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.