

Mercy On The Way

They came to Jericho.

As Jesus and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho,
Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar,
was sitting by the roadside.

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 Bartimaeus cried out even more loudly,
“Son of David, have mercy on me!”

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 Jesus on the way.

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Mark 10:46-52

October 27, 2024

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I.

Today, as you all know, is the *dreaded* Stewardship Sermon. Timed perfectly to fall on the Sunday before Halloween, it aligns nicely with all the other things that creak, moan, and go bump in the night; things that make us fret us, unnerve us, and evoke feelings of anxiety and worry. The annual Fall Stewardship drive here at the church is indeed a scary time; mostly because it is *real*: real bills to pay, real buildings to heat and maintain, real people on the payroll, and real people in the pews taking a hard look at their *own* finances and considering the degree to which they can afford to support the church.

This year, though, I would like to shift the Stewardship paradigm a bit in an effort to understand this very important issue in a slightly different way; in three ways, actually: Reactively, Reductively, and Reflectively.

II.

Reactive Stewardship is what I was talking about at the start of the sermon. We sit down to balance our check book, here at the church or in your kitchen at home, and usually it scares the heck out of us. Where can we cut back? How can we bring in additional income? How long can we keep operating under the existing model?

Linda does a lot of reactive stewardship over at our house. She makes her own yogurt and granola, shops at Aldis, clips coupons, can or freezes tomatoes, cranberries, strawberries, blueberries, herbs, pesto. She even uses lard rendered from local pigs to make our own dog biscuits. Last week we got three meals out of two chickens: roasted one night, leftovers a second night and, then, made our own stock for tortilla soup.

III.

A second way to understand stewardship, is *Reductively*. Though it isn't, as you might first imagine, about reducing costs. Instead, it is more about budget *prioritization* and *focusing* our impact. The first step in doing this is to take a hard look at what we, as a church, believe and how best to put our

energies toward those beliefs in a way that uniquely suits our congregation's specific skills and passions.

A good example of this is our church's Mission Budget. In case you are unaware, we employ a dual budget system here at the church. People can pledge or give to both the Operating Budget (utilities, salaries, programing) *and* the Mission Budget; 100% of which goes right back out to help in the world, both locally through the C&CP for example, and globally, through our support of the Clint McCoy feeding station. Though we cannot do *everything*, we endeavor to do some things *extremely* well.

IV.

The third way to consider stewardship, and the one I would like to focus on today, is Stewardship which is undertaken *Reflectively*. To help us understand this, we're going to use today's scripture reading, Mark 10:46-52.

Our story begins with a blind beggar by the name of Bartimaeus, who really does not have an awful lot to do except sit at one particular spot by the side of the road and rely on the good will of others in order to exist from day to day; with each day being pretty much like every other day. Yet, this *particular* day is unlike any other, Jesus, the miracle-worker is passing by. Now, recognize that this story appears at the *end* of Mark's gospel. In fact, Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, and this interaction with Bartimaeus is the very last thing he will do before the cascade of events which, as we understand it, begins with Palm Sunday and ends on Easter Sunday morning.

V.

So, it is a day of days for Bartimaeus; the chance of a life-time when Jesus walks by. What, then, should Bartimaeus do? Remember, he cannot see. He is simply listening to the voices of this very large crowd as they pass by above him while sitting there on the ground, and he is trying to guess that *one* moment when Jesus is in *earshot* in order that he might have *his* shot at a better life.

Now, understand, the stakes are pretty high, and he is only ever going to get this *one* chance. Bartimaeus has to cut through the noisy din of the crowd, quickly get Jesus' attention, and do so in such a way that Jesus will

respond to *his* voice, rather than the chorus of Jesus' followers; *or*, any number of *other* beggars with whom he quite probably shared the road.

VI.

So, cleverly, here is what Bartimaeus does: He shouts, **JESUS**,,, (acknowledging it is Jesus alone who can help him), **...Son of David...**(signifying he knows who Jesus is, and that he believes in him)...**Have mercy on me!** (meaning, help me somehow, and in anyway you want; beggars can't be choosers).

Now, mercy is an interesting thing; we do not hear too much about it in this day and age. People don't come home from work and say, "*Honey, I had a very merciful day today.*" We don't wake up in the morning and put *mercy* on our "To Do" List. In fact, pretty much the only occurrence of mercy in our lexicon is something like, "*The sermon was mercifully short.*" or "*She's at the mercy of circumstance*" (as if one's fate was the function of some cosmic crapshoot).

VII.

The Greek word used by Mark in this passage is ELEEO (EL-ee-oh), meaning, to have mercy on, to help one afflicted or seeking aid, to bring help to the wretched, or, more interestingly, to *experience* mercy. Meaning the same word describes both the act of *giving* mercy and the gift of *receiving* mercy. I do not think it is an overstatement or inaccurate to note that mercy is rarely something which we humans are very interested in giving, especially in our modern world. Our culture is much more concerned with concepts like *peace*, the somewhat unrealistic assumption that a reality exists or may be created where mercy will not be needed; and *justice*, that people should get *exactly* what they deserve (often, this implies a benefit which is earned or a privilege which is guaranteed, or a punishment which is fitting).

VIII.

More often than not, though, mercy is absent from our world, because our actions are usually fueled by outrage. We are outraged by war so we demand peace, we are outraged by evil and oppression so we demand justice. No one gets outraged and then demands mercy.

Take the scene from today's reading, Bartimaeus cries out, "Have mercy on me!" Yet, the outrage was not coming from Bartimaeus but, rather, from those around Jesus, disciples included, who were outraged, apparently, that he would dare ask for mercy. Moreover, in a sign that they are missing the whole point here, that Bartimaeus would ask Jesus for it. *Sternly* Bartimaeus was ordered: BE QUIET! But, Bartimaeus cried out even more loudly, "HAVE MERCY ON ME"

IX.

Well, all I can say, is *good* for Bartimaeus. It was only through his *insistence on Mercy* that Jesus finally heard his voice. When he did, Jesus stood still, grinding to a halt all the motion of life passing by on the road that day, even his own journey to Calvary, and called Bartimaeus over to him. Seizing the long hoped-for opportunity, Bartimaeus *sprang* to his feet and came to Jesus. Jesus asks him, "What do you want me to do for you?" Bartimaeus replies, "My teacher," (not a teacher, or any teacher, but his teacher) "let me see again." Then Jesus simply says to him (no fan fare, no fancy words or ritual) "Go; your faith has made you well." And (SNAP) just like that, Bartimaeus regained his sight...and chose to follow Jesus on the way.

X.

During this time of year, during our Stewardship Drive, we talk a lot about Reactive Stewardship and Reductive Stewardship, but what we really should be talking about is *Reflective* Stewardship. Why do we really give what we give to the church, and what do we insist on in return? The answer, of course, is many things: comfort, hope, community, purpose, strength, awareness, involvement, and love.

However, and I've been thinking about this for a good long while now, the one thing the church, and our church in particular, is *uniquely* suited to provide, is mercy. Upon careful, heart-felt and deeply reflective consideration, we realize that supporting this church is the very best way to both give, and receive mercy.

XI.

Remember, I told you earlier that the Greek the word for mercy is the same for giving it as it is for receiving it. Mercy, when you strip away everything else and reduce it down to one small, but critically important kernel of truth, is the moment when God's grace and our faith come together to function as one. Having mercy for another, is a sign of our faith in God's mercy (and grace) toward us. God's merciful grace toward us, gives us the faith we need to have mercy for others. I would also argue, that only when we are merciful to others will we create the fertile ground out of which things *like* peace and justice might grow. Finally, true mercy, when received, causes the recipient to be reflective about the nature of the gift he or she has been given.

XII.

When Stewardship time rolls around each year, we do not send people to your house to do the hard sell. We do not offer a tote bag as a carrot, or guilt as stick in order to garner a pledge to the church. There is no slick campaign, or a saccharine attempt to tug at your heart-strings. We simply ask that each one of us take a good, hard look at our lives and reflect on all the God-given blessings we, ourselves, enjoy. Then, let us consider what it is we, in return, would like to offer this world through our church here on the Park in Canton, New York. Because, when it is all said and done, we are one of the few remaining institutions in society that is listening for the shouts along the side of the road, and insisting that there be mercy on the way.

XIII.

For those of us sitting here today in the pews, on the stream, or reading these words, we are only ever going to get this one chance; and the stakes are pretty high, because the only truly scary thing in life, at Halloween, or any other time, is living in a world without mercy. Mercy is as real as real gets.

Finally, after Bartimaeus received mercy, after he regained his sight, he could have *easily* gone off to live his own life. However, he did not do that. Instead, he decided to follow Jesus, and I love this line, "*on the way.*" The gift of mercy changes both those who give it and those who receive it. We become more than we were before, and share a bond which never ends, and is always on the way....to the future God has planned for us to share together.

XIV.

I know we do not say it enough, so this morning I would like to conclude the sermon by simply saying, "Thank You!" On behalf of all those who have gone before us, and all those who will follow, I thank you for your continued mercy towards our church on behalf of our world. Amen.