

Sermon
“Persistent Faith”

November 3rd, 2019 – First Presbyterian Church
21st Sunday after Pentecost
Based on Mark 10:46-52

Mark 10:46-52 (NRSV)

They came to Jericho. As he 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 he 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 him on the way.

Prayer

Gracious God, as we hear your word proclaimed, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen

Sermon: Persistent Faith

We’re at the point in the Gospel of Mark where Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. A few chapters ago Jesus intentionally set his face towards Jerusalem, knowing full well what will happen there. His disciples, on the other hand, seem to have no idea.

But as they travel to Jerusalem a large crowd followed him...we know the disciples are there, but there also many others...probably some who have heard about him and were simply curious, others who have interacted with him and are now followers, and then probably some who, like the Pharisees, were just waiting for Jesus to say something that would get him into trouble.

And just outside of Jericho, about 16 miles away from Jerusalem, there is a blind beggar, named Bartimaeus, sitting by the side of the road. And

he hears that Jesus is coming. Now, he can't actually see Jesus coming, so he sits by the side of the road and waits.

And when he finally hears the crowd approaching, he begins to shout saying, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

But the crowd ordered him to be quiet, to leave Jesus alone.

There are all sorts of reasons why the crowds might want to silence this man...perhaps they just don't want to hear a man in need shouting at them, or perhaps they are in a hurry to reach Jericho and don't want Jesus to stop, or perhaps they're trying to protect themselves and maybe even Jesus. Perhaps they don't want the Pharisees or other religious leaders to know Jesus is coming. Or perhaps they fear making a scene and risking trouble with the Romans.

But no matter the crowd's reasons, Bartimaeus just keeps shouting louder and louder, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" "Son of David, have mercy on me!"

And at some point, Jesus hears Bartimaeus, and as he has done so often, he stopped and stood still, then said to those in the crowd, "Call him here."

And so, some people from the crowd go to Bartimaeus and say, "Take heart; get up, he is calling you." For at least a moment it's as if they hadn't been among those trying to get Bartimaeus to be quiet. And now they act as the heroes of the story by bringing Bartimaeus to Jesus.

But none of that matters to Bartimaeus who springs up in excitement, throws off his cloak, and goes to Jesus.

And Jesus says to him, "What do you want me to do for you?"

Now, in some sense, this seems like a ridiculous question...after all, the man is blind, clearly, he wants to see again. But Jesus asks the question anyways.

And Bartimaeus simply responds, "My teacher, let me see again."

And then Jesus says to him, "Go; your faith has made you well."

In some sense this seems like a fairly ordinary miracle story...there is a need, Jesus finds out about the need, and then Jesus takes action, in this case by giving Bartimaeus his sight.

But what's interesting is Bartimaeus himself. Here we have this man who has probably been blind for his entire life. Who survives by sitting on the side of the road begging for money, for food, for the very things he needs to survive in the world.

And one day, Bartimaeus hears that a man named Jesus is coming. Now, Bartimaeus seems to know something of this man, because he doesn't call him Jesus; instead, he calls him "Son of David." A title that wasn't used by the general crowds but reserved for the people who really understood who this man named Jesus actually was.

We don't know how Bartimaeus learned about Jesus, but what we see from Bartimaeus is a faith unlike the crowds who are following Jesus to Jerusalem.

We see it first in the very title that he gives to Jesus, but then in his insistence on continuing to call out to Jesus even when the people tried to silence him. No matter how many times the crowds told him to be quiet, Bartimaeus just kept shouting louder and louder.

He didn't give up. And he insisted upon being heard.

We call this persistence.

In so many areas of life we celebrate persistence...we celebrate as babies learn to walk, no matter how many times they fall down first. We celebrate the athletes who push themselves to the limits, refusing to give up. We celebrate the Cinderella stories of teams who compete against all odds. We celebrate the students who overcome obstacles to graduate. We celebrate in careers when people keep working hard even when the situation seems impossible. We celebrate when people refuse to give up.

Persistence is a good thing. But I think sometimes we forget about being persistent as we cry out to Jesus.

I think in some sense this story might be easier to grasp if we assume that it was the Holy Spirit who caused Jesus to stop and stand still. Or even if Jesus had seen Bartimaeus sitting on the side of the road, waved his hand and healed Bartimaeus without ever stopping.

It's harder to think about Bartimaeus being responsible for what happened to him. Because what if Bartimaeus had not cried out for mercy? What if Bartimaeus had simply let the crowd pass him by? What if Bartimaeus had never heard that Jesus was coming and so just assumed the crowd was full of normal, everyday people?

As far as we can know, if Bartimaeus had not cried out for mercy over and over again, Jesus and his disciples, along with the large, enthusiastic crowd simply would have continued on their journey, unphased and unhindered.

And Bartimaeus would have remained by the side of the road, still a blind man.

But instead we encounter an otherwise forgettable character who stubbornly persists in begging for mercy and is ultimately healed as a result. We encounter a man who refused to give up even when the odds seemed to be against him. Even when people tried to silence him, he kept on shouting.

And he's not the only character in the Gospels lifted up as an example of faith because he didn't give up. There's the poor widow who relentlessly asks the crooked judge to hear her case until he finally gives in. There's the friend who stops by to borrow bread and keeps knocking until he finally gets what he wants.

It's as if we need to be reminded that the life of faith requires persistence.

Now don't get me wrong, persistent faith doesn't mean that we must somehow save ourselves. Jesus Christ is always already the ultimate sign and promise of God's gracious initiative. It's what we celebrate and remember as we gather around this table. God has always acted first.

But what I think we sometimes forget is that what God desires most is a relationship. God wants to hear from us. God wants us to cry out from the side of the road or from wherever it is that we find ourselves. God wants to know what God can do for us.

And I think that is just as much an act of grace as when God sent God's one and only Son to be born, to live, and ultimately to die for us and for our salvation.

And so, it was an act of grace when Jesus called Bartimaeus over. It was an act of grace when Jesus asked Bartimaeus what he could do for him. And it was an act of grace when Jesus healed Bartimaeus.

Persistence is always met with grace.

Now grace doesn't mean we get everything we ever want, but grace does mean we will always be met with the presence of God. And grace means that the love of God will never let us go. That's the power of Christ coming to live among us.

And so, Jesus' coming among us invokes, invites and empowers a truly human reply, a crying out for mercy, a persistence in faith that may yet make us well.

And in the final act of grace in this narrative, Jesus instructs Bartimaeus saying, "go; your faith has made you well."

But Bartimaeus does something different, he leaves everything he had and joins Jesus and the crowds on their journey to Jerusalem.

It's an interesting time to be joining Jesus' journey, because we, as the readers 2000 years later, know what will happen when they arrive in Jerusalem. But Bartimaeus ignores Jesus' instructions to "go" and instead he "comes" with Jesus, following him on the way to Jerusalem and reminding us that is also grace that allows us to follow Jesus.

May we also know that kind of grace. Amen