

22nd Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 10.25.15
Scripture: Jeremiah 31:7-9
Mark 10:46-52

Raise your hand if your body is doing something you'd rather it not do, or is not doing something you want it very much to do. Today, or for the time being, if your body isn't going along with what program your mind or will or spirit has devised: raise your hand.

You want something, and your body won't let you have it. Wellness, fitness, some ability or some aesthetic, some accomplishment or expression: you want it and your body is what stands in the way of your getting it, a stumbling block.

It silly, I realize, to separate these two things too absolutely from one another. The body and the mind/will/spirit: these can only hardly be separated. Though whole schools of thought have attempted to do so, and whole peoples and cultures and traditions and conventions have risen from the idea that the body is one thing and the mind/will/spirit is quite another, in any practical sense, in any lived sense, they're so intertwined as to be one and the same.

It's not for nothing that to conceive is to do a most embodied thing—to become pregnant, while to conceive *of* is to a most mindful thing—to imagine something new. It's not for nothing that “conception” can name both the moment of having conceived a new life in pregnancy and a plan, a concept.

The body and the soul/mind/will: there entangled If someone punches you in the face, your face will hurt but so will your spirit. You might even be traumatized. If someone carefully binds up some wound you've suffered, you'll be safer from infection but you'll also probably be quite touched in the more emotional sense, and if someone *roughly* did the same thing you'd probably feel the difference both in your body and in your spirit. Remember when we washed one another's feet on Maundy Thursday a few years ago? My feet didn't feel nearly as clean as my soul, and hardly as bare.

I've been keenly aware lately of how many people I know to be frustrated in their embodied experience. I don't know why *lately*. If I know more people for whom this is the case, or if more people have let on to me that this is the case, or if the fact that I've been frustrated a lot lately has awakened me to the fact that this is also the case for other people, lots of other people, maybe most other people if not everyone everywhere: I don't know.

One of the scariest things I ever saw on TV as a kid was an episode of an otherwise unscary program, maybe *The Bionic Woman* or *The Six Million Dollar Man*. The villain had a hand that had no feeling, no nerves somehow, which became clear when he accidentally leaned onto a hot stove but couldn't feel the pain of his hand burning. It made smoke and apparently an odor, based on his delayed (and disturbed) reaction, and it spooked my young self, that someone could be so cut off from their own feeling, their own bodily sensations. It was monstrous to me. I think even then I knew, in a *visceral* sense, that I don't *have* a body, I am my body and my body is me.

But that's not to say I didn't (and don't) also feel often alienated from it, sometimes tremendously so. That's not to say I didn't (and don't) sometimes want to be free of the lump of flesh that grew of its own accord, and always (it seemed) in the wrong places. How I wanted (then) to be *free* of it—sometimes, really much of the time, to be *free* of it.

I mean, isn't that what freedom is? No limits? No limitations? And isn't that what the embodied life is—all limits, ever-growing limitations?

A lectionary podcast I listen to features three professors from Luther Seminary in St. Paul. One of them, Rolf Jacobson, suffered cancer when he was in high school, which required that both his legs be amputated. In the podcast episode for this week, while considering blind Bartimaeus, he noted that the most “un-churched” segment of the population across generational lines is the handicapped, and he supposes that this is true in part because Jesus is known to have been a healer, and (of course) we hear a lot about Jesus in church, we even hear a lot about him healing people—making the lame to walk, making the

blind to see. And these are encounters and testimonies that able-bodied people like me have the luxury of considering on an abstract, or metaphorical, or spiritual level. These are “lessons” to us, and not necessarily deeply desired encounters that we might have, if only we were so lucky. No, for those who can walk and see and do all sorts of other commonplace things, these stories feed our minds, whereas for those who are handicapped, these stories might strike them somewhere in the gut, and it might *hurt*.

I’m sorry if this story of blind Bartimaeus strikes anyone here as hurtful this morning.

It’s a familiar scenario, but there are some interesting particulars here. It’s familiar because each of the four gospels features Jesus making at least one blind man to see. What’s more, all three synoptic gospels feature such a healing happening as “they came to Jericho,” which is to say as they came to the end of Jesus’ itinerant ministry and approached Jerusalem. But what’s distinctive about Mark’s take on Jesus healing blindness is that he remembers it to have happened twice. Jesus healed two blind men on two separate occasions, and these encounters form brackets around the middle part of Mark’s gospel—the middle part, the heart of which is Jesus speaking to his disciples explicitly of his suffering and death.

Three times he would do this. Three times he would speak explicitly of his coming to the cross. The first time that he’d do so immediately followed Peter’s confession that Jesus is the Messiah. Others were saying he was Elijah or John the Baptizer or one of the prophets; but Peter had this to say, “You are the Messiah.” And at this Jesus “began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.” As if trusting that, now, at last, the disciples were ready to (yes) conceive of this inconceivable turn of events, Jesus began to teach them.

But they weren’t ready. (And how could they be? This is such a turn of event that you only get ready for it by encountering it for the first time, the second time...) After the first time Jesus spoke of this, Peter rebuked Jesus.

After the second time, all the disciples didn't understand what he was talking about and were afraid to ask. After the third time, the two sons of Zebedee, James and John, decided to make the best of a bad situation and asked that Jesus save them seats at the Lord's table in glory, one on Jesus' right side and the other on Jesus' left.

And this whole section is bracketed by Jesus healing two blind men, one in Bethsaida and the other just outside Jericho.

In Bethsaida, it would take two tries. Jesus would, when having taken the man out of the village, then spread a mixture of dirt and his own spittle on the blind man's eyes. And the man would report that he could see, but only sort of—that he could see men but they were blurry, resembling trees that could walk. The second try would then do it, his sight fully restored, the narrative noting that this man saw everything clearly, which Jesus apparently clearly saw in return—for thus he told him not to go back into the village but just to go straight home. The messianic secret: here it is. According to Mark, Jesus meant to keep his identity a secret, to keep secret his perhaps developing identity as the anointed one of God.

Such secret-keeping wasn't a concern, though, following this second blind man healed. No, for now the secret was out. As I said, he himself had told the disciples three times. What's more, now the secret was irrelevant, for from here Jesus was headed for Jerusalem. He would soon enough be riding into the city on a colt while people laid a path for him of cut branches and their own garments. He would soon enough, by sundown of this very day in fact, enter the Temple and look around and, finding it empty, head back out to the Mount Olives for the night. He would, frighteningly soon, be arrested (five days hence), and tried and crucified (six days hence).

So, Jesus didn't bother telling Bartimaeus not to tell anyone what had happened to him, didn't ask him to help keep the so-called messianic secret. Instead, and perhaps surprisingly, this exchange is quite light, beginning even with a narrative note that's probably not supposed to be funny but always strikes me as sort of funny.

Bartimaeus is explained to be the son of Timaeus. But, listen, the prefix on a name, “bar—“ means “son of.” So, how this reads in the original is “Bartimaeus Bartimaeus.”

There are serious reasons why the narration might scan this way. One is in keeping with a larger pattern in this gospel. “Mark” has a habit of rendering in Greek something that would then be translated into Coptic (or English as the case may be)—like when Jesus raised a little girl from death or near death, he’s remembered to have said to her, “*Talitha cum,*” which the narrative voice then explains for the reader means, “Little girl, get up,” or when Jesus urged a deaf man, “*Ephphatha,*” which was then explained to mean, “Open up!” “*Eloi, eloi, lema sabachtani!*” Jesus would soon be remembered to have uttered from the cross, which the narration informs us means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” So maybe here we’re got simply another example of this habit. But here the definition is mere repetition, “Bartimaeus Bartimaeus,” and it begs the question, why bother?

As if to explain why, some commentators point out the symmetry of the naming here. The blind man and Jesus are named in similar ways—with their names and then their designation of “son of.” Bartimaeus is son of Timaeus and Jesus is son of David—which perhaps serves the purpose of placing these two disparate figures in close relation, and in mutual recognition, a blind beggar and the anointed one of God.

Me? I just hear a Saturday Night Live skit in my head. Comedian Chris Farley was playing a personified El Niño and as such was a guest on the Weather Channel, appearing the eye of his own storm. While wind and rain raged around him, he explained to the anchorwoman what he was up to, referring to himself and his altering weather patterns always in the third person. He was El Niño, just like the belt around his waist declared. He was El Niño, and in the end of the short skit he added, for those who don’t speak Spanish, that El Niño would be rendered in English as “The Niño.”

I doubt very much there’s such silliness going on in the event this morning’s gospel lesson recounts. But then again, maybe there was. Maybe

Jesus knew if he wanted to have a laugh, and a light encounter, now was the time. Things had long been serious in this ministry, and were about to get more so, were about to get deadly serious. So maybe there was a giddy, gassy lightness about this encounter, which Jesus felt and the narrative voice felt to impart.

Actually, maybe we can and should hear a deep contrast between the last time Jesus is remembered to have asked someone, “What do you want me to do for you?” and this time.

Last time was actually just moments earlier, when James and John came to Jesus and said, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” And you’ve got to admire their forthrightness. We’ll give them credit at least for that. But I can’t help but to hear in Jesus’ reply a touch of surprised incredulity, “What is it you want me to do for you?” And that’s when they asked to be seated nearest to Jesus at the Lord’s table in glory. “You don’t know what you’re asking,” Jesus replied in a tone I hear as drained of everything unserious. “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” the implied answer being, “No.”

This time, though, perhaps Jesus could sense that what would be asked of him would indeed be worthy of response. “What is it you want me to do for you?”

“My teacher,” the blind beggar said, “let me see again.”

In some ways it’s a more humble request, in some ways it’s incredibly audacious.

“My teacher, let me see again.”

That he does—that Jesus does let Bartimaeus see again—easily becomes our focus in considering this story, in remembering this story. This story is about the healing of a blind man, the making of a blind man to see again. And cynics will point out that, yes, this is good, impressive even. But Bartimaeus will yet know frustration, will yet know pain. Like Lazarus, who was raised from the dead but who would then (presumably) die again, Bartimaeus did have

this one problem solved—his blindness—but he didn't have *the* problem solved, the problem of embodied existence. He would (if he was lucky) grow old, and he would likely get sick, he might even suffer, and eventually he would die.

And then there's this—that maybe one of the first things he saw as a now-sighted man was the crucifixion of the one who had so magically healed him. Maybe that was one of his earliest sights—a gruesome torment played out on someone so underserving. He did, after all, follow Jesus on the way as soon as he had regained his sight, and Jesus was, after all, heading into Jerusalem.

Seeing after having long been blind: this is good, but only sort of.

Cynics will say all this, indeed *do* say much of this, about these narratives, as if to prick the inflated, giddy bubble of faith.

And they're right. All of these things are true. His suffering was relieved for now, but not forever. His hardship was made lighter for the time being, but hardship would befall him again. It always does. It always does for everyone.

I know someone who had a successful career, a happy family, was nearing retirement and scaling back on work so he could travel more with his wife and visit his daughter more in Boston. But then he started having these weird attacks of vertigo. They're more and more frequent and they can't figure out what's going on. Meanwhile, he can't drive, sometimes he can't leave the house, the sofa. "It's not life-threatening," he said unhappily. "But it's life disrupting."

I know someone who was all set to row in the Head of the Charles—fit, well trained, hotel reservations and airline tickets secured. Then she fell and broke her leg—a bad break. She had to cancel her plans and her crew had to go in search of someone to fill her seat. It will take her the better part of a year to get back to where she was.

I know someone who was pregnant with her second child and everything was going well. Her first child was happy and healthy. Her marriage was secure. But then the baby arrived a still-birth, and she became exhausted by the experience, a struggle to get out of bed for years afterward. Her marriage has suffered, might be coming apart.

I know someone who has headed off for his junior year abroad. Not long after he'd landed on those foreign shores, he had a psychotic break and went missing for several weeks. His whole family nearly skidded off course because of it.

Roberta Bondi is the writer whose book we're reading in the Monday morning group. I've mentioned her before in a sermon, which is testimony to how deeply she's moving us and staying with us. I think everyone in the group is resonating with some aspect of her life and faith experience, which she is plain and honest about.

In one episode from her early adulthood she recounts having landed in a Benedictine convent for rest and a three-day retreat. She'd always tended toward anxiety and depression, and at this time in her life she was suffering in the extreme. Settled into her room, she heard a knock on the door. It was the Mother Superior, Mother Jane. She came into the room, tall and dressed in her habit. Ms. Bondi writes of her, "...there was something odd about the way she walked, the way she held herself. There was a freedom in her...radiating intelligence, energy, and kindness, absolutely without fear, completely at home in the world and fully, unapologetically herself."

The group lifted this passage out of the book a couple times for special consideration. That vision, that possibility: that someone could move in the world fully embodied and fully free: it stayed with us. Isn't the body the thing from which you'd need freedom? So how could it be the thing by which you move in freedom: the body as itself an expression of freedom rather than a hindrance to it?

This Mother Jane came to mind again as I imagined blind Bartimaeus springing up, throwing aside his cloak, and coming to Jesus. (And why not throw aside his cloak? After all, now that he wasn't going to be blind and begging anymore, he wouldn't need this identifying cloak.) Yes, he would be made to see. But more than that he was now free—springing up, his body a coil of energy and possibility *even though he was still blind*.

It seems to me one of the great challenges of the Christian life is to be full and free and embodied too. To fill up your frame rather than to shrink away from it, to deny it or punish or hide it away, to neglect it or stuff it with garbage: it seems to me one of the great challenges of following Christ is doing it with faith and faithfulness but also with a fully embodied striving after.

Our bodies will cause us suffering. They will fail us—perhaps already are. They will invoke in us shame—shame being the meeting-place of what we mean to be and what we are. But they are also a chance for us, an opportunity—to love and to care for, to move and to create, to build up and to express, even within the limitations they lay upon us. What is ours then to decide is what form we shall fashion out of what matter's been given to us.

That's actually a pretty question to consider on Reformation Sunday.
Thanks be to God.