

23rd Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 10.28.18
Scripture:

Jeremiah 31:7-9

For thus says the Lord: Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob, and raise shouts for the chief of the nations; proclaim, give praise, and say, "Save, O Lord, your people, the remnant of Israel."⁸ See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labor, together; a great company, they shall return here.⁹ With weeping they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back, I will let them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble; for I have become a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn.

Mark 10:46-52

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.⁴⁷ When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"⁴⁸ Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"⁴⁹ 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."⁵⁰ So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus.⁵¹ 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."⁵² Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

This man who followed Jesus on the way would have a short walk. Jericho was the last stop before Jerusalem—which means it was later this same day that Jesus would enter Jerusalem and the Temple, and it was later this same week that he would be crucified. Really, five days into following Jesus for now-sighted Bartimeus would have him staring down the cross.

Actually, it's worth contemplating that one of the first sights he saw was Jesus on the cross.

I wonder if seeing now felt like such a great thing.

This is a familiar scenario, Jesus making a blind man to see. Jesus is remembered to have done this more than a few times—and he himself seems to think this was central to his mission. He declared about himself according to the gospel of Luke, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." What makes this one interesting, to the extent that it is, is how it plays off the stories around it.

For example, this story stands in stark contrast to the one of just a couple encounters earlier—the one with the man who had many possessions. That man couldn't tolerate the thought

of selling all he had, giving the money to the poor, and following Jesus. Bartimeus, by contrast, is said to have thrown off his likely only possession, his cloak; to have thrown it off, though it was probably also his only means of income. Beggars would spread their cloaks out as the place where passers-by could then lay their alms to them—and this would have been a good place for begging. This road near Jericho would have traveling along it pilgrims heading to or from the Temple in Jerusalem and therefore in the mood and mindset for giving alms.

Or how about this one: this question Jesus is said to have asked, “What do you want me to do for you?” He’s remembered to have asked this before, in fact just moments before, when still walking on this road up to Jericho James and John came up to Jesus and said to him, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.”

He said to them, “What is it you want me to do for you?” And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” Jesus told them, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” They replied, “We are able.”

It’s a little different here, though. When Jesus asked the yet blind Bartimeus, “What do you want me to do for you?” what Bartimeus asked for was just as audacious as what the disciples had wanted, but this Jesus would grant, this Jesus *could* grant.

So what’s the difference? Both requests were audacious. Both making the requests showed themselves to be committed to Jesus’ mission. But only Bartimeus’ request seems to have been taken seriously. What’s the difference?

At first I thought it lay in the realms in which each request would be fulfilled, if each were to be fulfilled. The disciples were asking for something to happen in the realm of God, while Bartimeus asked something to happen in the realm of this world. And maybe that accounts for Jesus recognizing the powerful faith of Bartimeus but questioning the disciples’ also powerful faith. I mean, didn’t both cast aside of their lives and livelihoods, and come to follow Jesus? Don’t both demonstrate remarkable willingness to open themselves up to Jesus’ authority and immediacy? And don’t both request something that is self-serving, (by which I don’t mean to imply I disapprove of it)? So maybe the difference was that the request of Bartimeus was one that would operate in the world that Jesus had been given to act within for God’s purposes, but the request of the disciples would operate far beyond that.

It was a jurisdictional issue.

But then I thought better of this because it draws too crisp a line of distinction between the realm of God and the realms of this world—and one of the wonders of Jesus all along is that he is the immediate presence of God in the world, he is the presentation of the transcendent amidst the imminent. Jesus is the one in the beginning of this story of whom John the baptizer (and Jesus' cousin) rightly spoke, "The kingdom of God has come near!" Jesus is the one whose breathing his last breath on the cross would result in the curtain of the Temple being torn in two, this curtain that was to signify the separation assumed between the earthly and the heavenly. Really, the whole point of Jesus as revelation in this book of Mark is that the separation we conceive of, and perceive, and insist upon, between ourselves and God, between this ugly old world and the pure and beautiful realm of God, *is not there*—or at least not anymore, not since Jesus came. There is no separation. There is no realm of the material and realm of the spiritual; there is no realm of the gross, fallen body and altogether different realm the lovely, lofty soul. There is no realm of truth and realm of falseness and deception. These binaries are actually intermixed, history and the human story a sloppy, confusing, lovely intermixing of the created and the eternal. So, it couldn't be that what the blind man asked for was an act within the jurisdiction of Jesus while the disciples had requested something beyond what was his to grant.

This couldn't be a jurisdictional issue.

So what was the difference?

Facebook is always a good distraction from frustration. It's not usually *helpful*, but it is distracting, which often makes it very *unhelpful*. The only way through frustration is through it. Usually.

I have smart friends, though.

On Friday, Sheela posted an article from the *Guardian UK*, a commentary by Owen Jones, whose title was a statement: "We Don't Want Billionaires' Charity. We Want Them to Pay Their Taxes." In it, Mr. Jones highlights the stunning fact that "last year billionaires made more money than any other point in the history of human civilization." This means 2,158 people accrued \$8.9 trillion. Having done so, many of them signed a "Giving Pledge," in which they promise to leave half their wealth to charity once they're dead. The richest man on earth, Jeff Bezos, hasn't signed

yet, but we're all hoping. Maybe we should all write him a note, each of us. Flatter him: "Dear Mr. Bezos..."

And Mr. Jones knows what you're thinking: "Who can begrudge the generosity of the wealthy? ...Surely such charity should be applauded. But," he would argue back, and I with him (and presumably Sheela as well), "philanthropy is a dangerous substitution for progressive taxation. Consider Bono," he writes, "a man who gained a reputation for ceaselessly campaigning for the world's neediest." But Bono's rock band, and the means of his massive income, U2, moved their money from Ireland to the Netherlands, then involved Malta and Lithuania, all to avoid progressive taxation—which is legal, mind you. "Bono himself said of U2's affairs," Mr. Jones writes, "it was 'just some smart people we have...trying to be sensible about the way we're taxed.'"

Sensible.

That word is doing a *lot* of work in that sentence.

No. Forget that none of this is sensible. Forget that any one person controlling wealth at this level is not in any way indicative of the sensible. Forget it. Just put it out of your mind because otherwise your mind will become one long-running internal-monologue of a jeremiad, named after Jeremiah, of course, the prophet who remembered the promise of justice embedded in the founding of this people and who condemned the people who they settled for increasing injustice, who also held to task other prophets for preaching, "Peace, peace," when there is no peace. Forget it all, because, though it's not sensible for Malta and Lithuania to be enlisted so billionaires can keep out of the commonwealth what amounts to them pocket change, and it certainly isn't just or good or right or stabilizing, it is legal.

Mr. Jones again: "...rich people and major corporations have the means to avoid tax legally. [But] it's estimated that global losses from multinational corporations shifting their profits come to \$500,000,000,000 a year, while cash stashed in tax havens is worth at least 10% of the world's economy—and it's the world's poorest who suffer the consequences. Philanthropy, then, is a means of making the very rich look generous, while they save far more money through exploiting loopholes and using tax havens."

But that's not all. "The decision on how philanthropic money is spent is made on the whims and personal interests of the wealthy, rather than what is best. In the US, for example, only 12% of philanthropic money went to human services: it was more likely to be spent on arts and

higher education. Those choosing where the money goes are often highly unrepresentative of the broader population, and thus more likely to be out of touch with their needs....Money raised by progressive taxation, on the other hand, is spent by democratically accountable governments that have to justify their priorities, which are far more likely to relate to social need.”

It was a short article, thank God, because I didn’t have much more time for distraction and I certainly don’t have much more capacity for containing galling injustice. Why is it so radical a thing that life will have its costs, that the good life will often exact a high cost, and that to dodge those costs is to dodge what actually has value, the life that truly is life?

But radical it seems to be. I recently had a conversation about some building projects at Williams College. They’re about to begin building a new boathouse, and its cost will run in the millions of dollars. For a boathouse, a *replacement* boathouse. (But the one they have looks so *pre-fab*.) “They’re got this one investor,” my North County friend who knows about it explained. “He gives millions of dollars himself. He’s a hedge fund guy, and he’s generous in his giving. So it won’t actually cost the college much at all. It’s an investment, really, because more kids will want to go there.”

“No,” I said. “He should be paying taxes. Why should Williams College get all that money? Why should the students already privileged enough to go there get one more luxury good? Why should one guy get to decide what’s done with all that money? He should be paying taxes.”

“Oh, he’s nice guy,” my friend said, as if paying taxes is something only us jerks should be punished with—and my friend is a *liberal*.

“What happened?” I asked him. “What happened to our society that we think taxes are such a violation?”

And now I ask you, what happened that those who disobey tax laws are thought smart, and are living proof that we should just write the laws in such a way as people are currently living by them, but that those living in violation immigration laws, for example, are deemed worthy of the worst punishment, deportation? If we’re going to ignore laws for one class of people, we should ignore them for all. If we’re going to rewrite laws based on how they’re currently obeyed, we should do this for the most vulnerable among us as swiftly as we do for those most powerful. Or, if we’re going to be a law-abiding society, we should start with those whose obedience to the law

would cost them proportionately the least, but would benefit the commonwealth the most, rather than with those for whom it would cost them everything.

Loopholes. Everyone's looking for a loophole. Meanwhile, we all sort of know that the things that fill us most with purpose and conviction are the things that have cost us. (Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. Where you have invested that which you value most [your life, your time, your strength], there your heart will be also.) Isn't this why parents love their children so much? And isn't this why those of us languoring in the lap of luxury (now that the children are older) then go looking for such risky experience to share with others—to make us feel alive? Isn't this why we're all out running marathons together, or rowing a regatta in a nor-easter, or going sky-diving or bungee-jumping, or trekking to Burning Man to camp with thousands of strangers in the desert for a week?

Decadent hardship, I'm going to begin calling it. We look for loopholes to avoid actual costliness and then we buy artificial struggle—and no more do any of us do this than the billionaires whose lived “hardship” amounts to giving away a few million dollars, a tiny portion of their actual wealth.

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That's it.

That's it!

That's the difference. Bartimeus, in asking for sight, would in effect first and foremost encounter the cross, while the disciples, in asking for a special seat at the table in glory, were in effect asking to bypass the cross.

That's it. That's the difference. Bartimeus' request, whether he knew it or not, was one of confronting the cross, while James' and John's request, whether they knew it or not, was one of overstepping the cross. They wanted the glory, but failed to understand that it came with the cross, the costly cross, that otherwise that meal in glory will just leave you feeling overfull, a gold-dusted steak rather than a home-cooked meal. Bartimeus wanted to see, and amidst a world where the sites are so often those of suffering—but he wanted in on that nonetheless.

This is ancient truth. It needs to be taught ever anew, and never more than now. As to who will do this work of teaching anew, I'm here to tell you you're more Bartimeus than James

and John. You, all of you, each of us here in this place: we have seen the cross, which we can't un-see. Once sighted to this truth, it's tough to go blind again.

Look for the love that will cost you, and live it out. Tell your friends and your neighbors, your children, your colleagues, that this is what you're up to. They might not know this is how it's done—the good life, the life that truly is life.

Thanks be to God.