

Sermon for Sunday, February 25, 2024

Mark 10:32-52

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Last Sunday we spent time considering the story of a rich man who asks Jesus the question, "How do I inherit eternal life?" Jesus' response was to tell him to give away all of his possessions and follow him. The man went away sorrowful because "he had many possessions."

Today's Scripture reading includes the story of Bartimaeus, a blind man who calls out for healing from Jesus. At first the crowd squashes his boisterous calls for attention. But Jesus hears him and invites him to come close. At this invitation Bartimaeus throws off his cloak and comes to Jesus. Bartimaeus is a poor man; begging is the only way that he can provide for his needs. It is likely that he has almost no possessions—the most important one being his cloak. A cloak was an outer garment and often served as a blanket. It was probably his most valuable possession. It is reasonable to say that Bartimaeus is walking away from everything he owns to come close to Jesus. As he walks away from his cloak he "Immediately regained his sight and followed him [Jesus] on the way."

Last Sunday when we talked about the rich man I led you to consider that the point that Jesus is making is not about giving up everything so that you become impoverished; it was about giving up possessions so as to become vulnerable and rely ever more deeply on Jesus. Bartimaeus knows all about vulnerability. As a blind man he is always vulnerable, always in need; always relying on the generosity of others.

When Bartimaeus regains his sight he could have gone anywhere; done most anything. He is no longer deeply vulnerable and can walk away from it to "take charge of his life." But instead he chooses to follow Jesus. He doesn't take charge of his life; he allows Jesus to take charge.

The gospel reading tells us that Jesus and his followers were nearing Jericho. This is the last city before they climb the hill to enter Jerusalem. By now the disciples have been told three times that when they get to Jerusalem Jesus will be arrested, crucified, and put to death. If they have any understanding of this situation,

they recognize that they are walking into a hornet's nest of trouble. We have no idea if Bartimaeus has any knowledge of this situation. From the text it appears that Bartimaeus has been a follower of Jesus for "about a minute" and that he has no knowledge of what's going to happen to Jesus or to any of Jesus' followers. But he doesn't care. He goes anyway. He becomes a follower. *(Pause)*

Now let's go back in today's reading a few verses to where Jesus refers to his baptism. Baptism in most Christian traditions [as well as our own] is mostly about "a cute little baby" that we ooh and aah over as the child is splashed with water. Now baptism is important and I love this sacrament as much as anyone. I'm not promoting the idea that we shouldn't baptize children but I want you to recognize the emotion that we feel on a baptism day.

The baptism that Jesus talks about in this reading is not the joy-filled baptism that we are used to witnessing. Jesus is talking about taking on a way of life—a hard and dangerous way of life. We don't like to think about baptism in this way. But it's important for us to consider. We are in the season of Lent and part of the purpose of this season is to make space for us to consider how we are following Jesus. What I mean is: are we? Are we willing to allow ourselves to become vulnerable? Are we willing to jump up like Bartimaeus and follow without thinking about the consequences? Are we willing to be baptized with the baptism that Jesus will experience?

These are hard words. As I read them I immediately think about my responsibilities: a commitment to my children, paying the mortgage, putting food on the table, the coffee pot I left plugged in and I shudder at the idea of becoming vulnerable.

Jesus is challenging us to be followers of him, to keep our eyes on him, to accept the challenge of living a counter-cultural way of life. But we need to be aware that there are going to be times when we, as a follower, are going to have to make hard, hard choices. This occurs on a personal level, but it also occurs on a congregational level. Since today is annual meeting day I now want to turn our thoughts toward the congregational level.

What if Jesus leads Vasa congregation to Jerusalem? What if Jesus leads us to the cross, to our crucifixion and death? Perhaps not a physical death, but instead a mental, emotional, and spiritual death? Some have wondered about the long term future of Vasa Congregation and have been brave enough to share their thoughts with me. They ask themselves what Vasa will be in 20 or 30 years.

Fair enough. Lest you think I, as your pastor, am oblivious to these questions, I wonder about them as well.

But my response is to ask you to consider Bartimaeus again. When Bartimaeus leaped up from his cloak he believed that Jesus, the Son of David, would heal him. He had faith in Jesus and was willing to follow him, without consideration for his future.

Is Vasa Congregation able to do the same? Is Vasa Congregation able to keep their eyes on Jesus? Is Vasa Congregation able to go through an excruciating pain so that we can be restored to life on the other side? Is Vasa Congregation able to follow Jesus without consideration for our future?

Jesus may be leading Vasa to Jerusalem. We know that the world around us has changed a great deal since the 60's and 70's when our membership and attendance were at its peak. But the world around us continues to change as do our circumstances. Like Bartimaeus we are going to have to keep our eyes on Jesus, both as individuals and as a congregation. Jesus was recognizable but he was not the same after his resurrection. But he WAS resurrected. You will not be the same after your resurrection but you will be resurrected. If Jesus is leading Vasa Congregation to a type of death it will not be the same after its resurrection, but it will be resurrected. That's the good news for us today: Jesus was resurrected, we will be resurrected, and so will Vasa Congregation.

I close with a prayer written by Father Thomas Merton. Originally it was written as a prayer for an individual. I have changed the pronouns so that it is a prayer for our congregation. Let us pray:

My Lord God, we have no idea where we are going. We do not see the road ahead of us. We cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do we really know ourselves, and the fact that we think we are following your will does not mean that we are actually doing so. But we believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And we hope we have that desire in all that we are doing. We hope that we will never do anything apart from that desire. And we know that if we do this you will lead us by the right road, though we may know nothing about it. Therefore will we trust you always, though we may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. We will not fear, for you are ever with us, and you will never leave us to face our perils alone. [1] Amen.

Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux: 1999), 79.

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