

Sunday October 28th, 2018
Reformation Sunday

PRAYER: O God, by the waters of our exile, we sit and weep, remembering our home. How can we sing your song in a foreign land? (Ps. 137:1, 4)

We are estranged from ourselves; we are alienated from one another. O God, you know our weakness: have compassion upon us; send your Spirit to heal us and to prepare the way for our return. Lead us by the still waters, restore our souls. And your praise shall always be one our lips, and we shall exalt your name together.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE: Remember that Christ did not exalt himself to be made a high priest but was appointed by God, who said, “You are a priest forever.” As we confess our sins, we have assurance that Christ intercedes on our behalf. God hears our prayer. Through Jesus Christ we are forgiven.

STEWARDSHIP: “No one shall come into the presence of the Lord empty-handed. Each of you shall bring such a gift as he can in proportion to the blessing which the Lord your God has given you.” (Deuteronomy 16:16, 17)

OFFERTORY PRAYER: God of goodness, you lavish your gifts on us. You have given us health; so we dedicate our vigor to following Christ. You have given us strength; we offer our energy to serve neighbours in need. You have given us commandments; we contribute a portion of our wealth as signs of our faithfulness. Accept the tributes we bring. Use them to accomplish your will.

PASTORAL PRAYER: It is easy, O God, to say words: words of praise, words of thanksgiving and even words of petition. Words are often easy for us, but words can also hide our reality. How we fear that our words are not reflective of our hearts. Are we honest with you when we praise your name when we would rather shout incrimination and anger? It is time, O God, to admit to you that we struggle with the hard side of your love. The side of your love that says no to us, or stops us, or closes doors to us. None of us wants to admit to anyone, let alone you, that you said no. It is so hard for us to feel stagnant, or to feel we are regressing in our health, our faith, and our relationships. We are a people that celebrate and demand from you progress, and joy. So, when the shadows come, the dark moments of life, we feel cheated, and become disillusioned. How we wish we were brave enough to face the trials thrust upon us. How we wish we could trust you in all things, but the spirit is willing, and the flesh is certainly weak.

Many of us know the thorns of the flesh intimately. For some of us it is the thorns of failing health, the ravages of aging, or the pain of watching our loved ones suffer. For some of us it is the thorns of missed opportunities, failed employment, or dreams that have died. For others, those thorns are thrust into our tender hearts by those who have betrayed us, or not met our expectations, or simply don't reciprocate our love. Still others of us are burdened by thorns out of our control, thorns created by international and even domestic turmoil. And many of us carry more than one, and we are hurting. This season of barren trees, and cold winds, simply enhances our souls' weakness. How tempting it is to simply give up. Give up our faith. Give up our effort at sustaining draining relationships. Give up our hope.

The Apostle Paul knew about these thorns. He cried out three time to have just one of them removed, and you responded by telling him that your grace is sufficient.

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How we wish we could believe this. How we need to believe this and experience this. O God, we need you. Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on us. If our thorns cannot be removed, if we must bare our illness, our unemployment, our aging, our failed relationships, our loveless family ties, then grace us as never before. Pour yourself into our grief, our loss and our heartache. Let us as never before know the truth that Jesus is our high priest, familiar with all human experience who intercedes on our behalf.

Cast into us and before us a new vision. Show us that our lives can consist of more than the most recent pain or struggle. Give us a strength that overshadows everything that would keep us sitting on the side of the road of life, begging for the simple leftovers of grace. Give us courage to not let the crowds silence our calls to you. Keep us from the negative voices that tell us to stop wasting our breath seeking you out. Keep us, we pray from burdening others with the impossible task of making us happy, or feeling we are important, or from thinking they, instead of you, are our Saviour.

Help us to not hinder others in their journey to find you. Instead, grant us wisdom, and the joy, of being the ones who yell, "Cheer up! He is calling you!" Let ours be first and foremost a ministry of encouragement, but encouragement with a purpose. May our words, our visits, our phone calls, not keep people where they are, but build them up and lead them to a new place, a new chapter in their growth? For that is what Jesus did, and if we are to build healthy communities we must follow his example.

And now, O God, may the spirit of prayer follow us into the rest of this time of worship. May the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight? May your Word made flesh that dwelt among us, meet us in these moments together, and may we hear his sweet voice calling us to come and walk with him?

BENEDICTION: We were blind beggars sitting by the roadside. As people approached, they would pass quietly by on the other side. But at the approach of the Lord, we cried out; we sprang up and begged for our sight. We have not been rebuked. So, let us go now, serving in the spirit of the one who serves without pause and seeing in the spirit of the one who sees without scorn.

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Mark 10:46-52
“Take Heart, He’s Calling You!”

Here is an ancient Chinese story I came across. A farmer had one old horse that he used for tilling his fields. One day the horse escaped into the hills and when the farmer’s neighbours heard about it, they sympathized with the old man over his bad luck. “Bad luck? Good luck? Who knows?” said the farmer. A week later, the horse returned with a herd of wild horses from the hills and this time the neighbours congratulated the farmer on his good luck. “Good luck? Bad luck? Who knows?” said the farmer.

Then, when the farmer’s son was attempting to tame one of the wild horses, he fell off its back and broke his leg. Everyone agreed that this was very bad luck. Not the farmer, who replied, “Bad luck? Good luck? Who knows?” Some weeks later, the army marched into town, and forced every able-bodied young man to go fight in a bloody war. When they saw that the farmer’s son had a broken leg, they let him stay.

Everyone was very happy at the farmer’s good luck. The farmer said, “Good luck? Bad luck? Who knows?” Who knows, indeed? Life is lot like that isn’t it? Sometimes it seems that things are going well, and at other times they are going badly. Some people believe it is based on luck, some people believe it is based on fate, and still others believe that God uses our good fortune, or bad circumstances, to reward or punish us.

I was very aware, while serving in Toronto among many ethnic groups, that belief in luck played a big part in how many people viewed their circumstance. Many decisions were made by individuals based on their belief that they could enhance, or just simply protect their level of luck. For example: traditional Chinese folk will not normally buy a home with the number 4 in its address. The reason. The symbol for the number four is similar to the symbol for death and they believe it is bad luck to have anything that mentions or represents death.

The number 6 though was considered lucky. In our culture we have lucky rabbit’s foot, (Not so lucky for the rabbit) and four-leaf clovers. We avoid the number 13, walking under ladders, or having a black cat cross our path. We knock on wood when we feel we have tempted fate, or toss salt over our shoulder if we spill any. And heaven help us if we break a mirror. Sports pros also have rituals they think will bring them luck, like growing the playoff beard.

Whether we think it is luck, fate, or divine involvement: all of us know what it is like to feel we are being tossed around by our circumstances. We all want to have some explanation of why things happen to us. So, when I read about the apostle Paul in Philippians 4, learning to be content, even happy in all things, I wonder if he is all there mentally. He writes that he was happy when things were bad (he was in jail at the time he wrote Philippians), and he was happy when things were going well.

Elsewhere, Paul writes in Romans 8:28, “We know that in everything, God works for the good of those who love him”. Is this really true?

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When all of life seems to be conspiring against us, what possible good can I look forward to? I am sure that Bartimaeus must have questioned the goodness of God. Not only was he blind, but it is clear he lived in extreme poverty. It is likely that he was also quite lonely, as few women would marry a blind man in Jesus' day, as they couldn't provide any income.

In Jesus' day, a man or woman in the circumstances of Bartimaeus, had few options just to stay alive. Begging was one of those few options, and Bartimaeus had chosen the only course open to him. Every day he came, or was led, to the main road from Jericho to Jerusalem, or perhaps he simply lived at the side of the road where he spread his outer coat in front of him, and he called out to the people who passed by for alms or money.

Since the Passover was drawing near, there would be many more travelers on the road, and Bartimaeus had perhaps higher expectations than normal that the pilgrims would be a bit more generous. This happens in Toronto, after a big event like a blue Jay's game. Beggars will park themselves on major pedestrian walkways looking for handouts. Wherever large crowds would pass by, there were beggars in Jesus' day.

So, here we find Bartimaeus doing what he can to buy some bread. Is it: good luck, bad luck, or just fate that brought him to this place? We might also wonder about what possible good could come of his situation?

Surely, no one would intentionally choose this life, although there are recorded stories of children in poor countries being intentionally disabled to gain sympathy as they beg. Given a choice, Bartimaeus would probably rather be doing something else, almost anything else. Bartimaeus had another strike against him that we often overlook, or maybe we would rather not think about.

In his culture, and in the Jewish belief system of that time, it was believed that disabilities and deformities were caused by sin. In John 9 we read of a man born blind, and the disciples ask, "Whose sin caused this man to be born blind; his own or his parent's?" It is not an idle question. Some people, even today, believe that calamities that fall on people are the result of God's divine retribution; like the great flood in Noah's day.

I've heard people, sometimes famous people or preachers, speculate that AIDS is God's judgment on homosexuals, even though thousands of heterosexuals die of the disease every year. I've heard burning sermons about how hurricanes like the one recently that devastated Florida, was God's vengeance on that city, state, or country. Is this true? If it is, I would frankly rather be governed by bad luck or good luck. I would rather have a mindless series of events, than a directed, hostile intervention.

There are a lot of angry, disillusioned people in this world, who feel life has dealt them a bad hand. People who feel they are forced to make difficult decisions, like the thousands of refugees now marching out of Honduras through Mexico and heading to the US. Is there any reason at all to believe the Apostle Paul when he writes that, "good things come to those who love the Lord".

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So, what are we to say to those whose life's experience has been difficult? What response do we make to the thousands of desperate people displaced by war, economic hardship, and hopelessness? How do we pronounce hope to a man or woman like Bartimaeus, or the folks we encounter who ask us for spare change? Maybe: we wonder how we can glean hope for ourselves.

I guess the first thing we need to settle is this; "What exactly do you want?" When Jesus asks this question of Bartimaeus, I at first wonder how omnipotent Jesus really is. Does Jesus not see that Bartimaeus is blind? Isn't it obvious what he wants? I mean he is stumbling around trying to reach Jesus; arms outstretched feeling his way. Are the needs of people not clearly obvious to anyone with eyes to see and ears to hear?

The more pressing question, of course, is: isn't it obvious what we need in our distress? I am sure it is obvious to Jesus, but maybe not to us. Maybe the greatest personal pain we experience, has to do with not really knowing what we want. We may know what our immediate wants are, but what is it that will truly enhance our lives.

Think about Bartimaeus for a moment. Here is this blind man; who for years sat on the busiest road in the city, with his outer coat laid out to receive money, what does he want from Jesus? Does he really want to be healed? Perhaps we forget that if he is healed, Bartimaeus will have to get a job. He can no longer use blindness as a reason to beg from others. Instead of sitting at the roadside, he may have to get up every day, and go and work farm fields.

Is he prepared for this? Commentators on this passage, point out that this incident probably occurred on the road between the old city of Jericho and the new city of Jericho. The symbolism is powerful. If Bartimaeus is healed, he will have to move from his old ways, to the new ways of living. In other words, symbolically he will have to move from the old city to the new.

Are you sure you want Jesus to intervene in whatever it is that is plaguing you? There is a funny story that I originally heard in connection to the town of Port Dover. Port Dover is a lakeside community with a lovely beach area, and this fabricated story involves an itinerant preacher and healer who began ministering on the beach in Port Dover. One day the preacher came across an old fisherman whose hands were crippled by arthritis, and the preacher prayed over his hands and he was healed.

On another day the preacher came across an elderly woman whose back was severely stooped over, and he prayed with her and she was healed. On another day the preacher happened upon a man in a wheel chair, whose leg was badly damaged and in a cast. He was about to pray over the man, when the man told him to stop. "Don't you want to be healed," the preacher asked. "No!" replied the man.

"Don't you want to get out of that chair, and walk again?" the preacher asked. "No, not really." the man said, rather annoyed. "And why not?" the preacher asked.

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“Well to tell you the truth, I hurt my leg while at work, and have just now got my workman’s compensation.” If we ask for a miracle, please be advised that Jesus will demand that miracle take us somewhere we perhaps would rather not go. So again, I ask, as Jesus did, “What do you want him to do for you?” And are you prepared for the consequences?

Is it really healing your desire, or are you really just looking for sympathy, and the attention of the crowd? Do you really want your relationship healed, or are you looking for an excuse to end it? Do you really want your children to find God, knowing that in finding him they may be called to the farthest corners of the globe, and maybe even into some hostile places to serve him? Do you see what Jesus is getting at here?

Are you sure you know what you want? There is the old English proverb, “Be careful what you ask for, you might just get it.” I love the story about a childless couple who brought their heartache to the local Catholic priest. He was about to leave for some years of service at the Vatican, and offered to light a candle to intercede for them that they might have a child.

Some years later, the priest returned home, and visited the couple only to find the house over run by children. “How marvelous, my prayers have been answered, but where is your husband?” the priest asked. The very tired mother replied, ‘He’s gone to the Vatican to blow out that candle.’”

Bartimaeus knew what he wanted, and in many ways was prepared to accept the challenges inherent in getting what he wanted. “I want to see!” Jesus replied, “Go your way. Your faith has healed you.” But Bartimaeus did a very wise thing, and it is a lesson to all of us. Bartimaeus got what he believed he wanted, and Jesus told him to go his own way, to go and find his direction with his new vision.

It is an offer Jesus makes to all of us after he intercedes for us. Jesus is a gentleman. He never forces us, or coerces us, into doing something we will not do of our own free will. After Jesus heals us, restores our relationships, and grants us our heart’s desire, he sets us free. True mercy, true grace, is always offered with no strings attached. Remember the ten lepers Jesus healed. The only obligation they had, was to show themselves to the authorities to be declared clean, after that they could go where they wanted. Only one leper voluntarily returned to thank him.

We are always free to do as we please with our new-found health or wholeness. I noticed Jesus does this in almost every case of healing. He heals people, and he lets them go. He doesn’t force them into any direction to follow. He lets them choose the path they take. Bartimaeus was free to go wherever he wished, with Jesus’ blessing. But what does Bartimaeus do?

What is his reaction to being healed, to receiving an answer to his request? Bartimaeus is said to have followed Jesus down the road, or more literally, on the way. Of the many courses Bartimaeus could have followed, he chose to follow Jesus.

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In fact, his following may have been very significant. This story is so vivid in its detail, that it is certainly a firsthand account, and because he is named, which almost never happened in healing stories, commentators believe Bartimaeus may have been a member of the early church. His choice was to follow Jesus.

The early church was often referred to as “People of the Way”. Bartimaeus chose to follow Jesus’ way. “What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus asks each one of us. In our distress, in our efforts to fight through the crowds to be heard by God in Christ, do we even know what we want. Actually, I think I know what we all want. We all want to hear the words, “Cheer up! Come on, he’s calling you!”

I think in the end that is what we want more than anything else. I think we can endure a great deal in this life, if only we had an awareness that Jesus knew we were here. That Jesus was willing to listen to us, and maybe even heal us, or resolve whatever crisis is current in our lives. Well, “Cheer up! Come on, he’s calling you!” But if you want to be near him you have to respond. You have to get up.

Maybe that is why we suffer so much. We just don’t want to move from where we are because we know if we get close to Jesus, things are going to change. The most powerful thing that will change is that we will be given new vision. A vision of what our lives can be despite our struggles and even our impairments. What do you want Jesus to do for you? More than anything: more than physical healing, more than restoration of your relationships, more than a new job, more than any possible problem you may have, Jesus offers you a new vision and a new direction.