



Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Finding Room on the Agenda

A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

October 25, 2009

30th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B)

Mark 10:46-52

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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.

About 3 Saturdays ago, I stopped into the office to do a bit of work, knowing full well that there was a group of folks working to rebuild the tool shed out back. I figured I was more help to their project by choosing to stay away than joining them.

When I finished what I had come to do, I walked back to my car, got in, and tried to start it. It was dead. So I did the dreaded walk of shame across the expansive parking lot to where the group was hard at work. When I asked if anyone had a set of jumper cables, about 8 people sprang down ladders and raced toward their pick-up trucks. It was a stunning moment.

Then, after Tim managed to get my car going again, he turned and drove back to the group. I made it as far as the corner before it died again, so I picked up my cell phone and dialed someone in the group. When I looked up, here came a whole pick-up load of disciples, ready to do whatever was needed to get me moving again.

I thought of them as I worked on this sermon on the story of Bartimaeus. They had a number of things to do that day, and I wasn't anywhere on their agenda, which is a lot like what's going on in our text for today. But before we figure out how the story ends and what we are to make of it, I want us to go back to the beginning.

Did you hear how this passage began? "(Jesus and his disciples) came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho..."

Talk about your quick exits. Jesus came to Jericho. And as he was leaving Jericho. There is no wasting time here. Jesus and the disciples are on the move, moving toward

Jerusalem and the cross. You can almost picture them as they arrive in Jericho. Peter, pulling out his Blackberry and finding they have no appointments scheduled there that day. No people to see, no debates in the synagogue, no questions from Pharisees to address.

You can almost hear James and John—still reeling a bit from their ill-fated attempt to secure prominent seats in glory—you can almost hear them muttering that there aren't any decent restaurants nearby, and perhaps they should wait until the next town.

One of them pulls out his I-Phone to update his Facebook status: 10:15—entered Jericho. 10:16—leaving Jericho.

It's almost as if you can hear the collective disciples announce, "This is Jericho. We've seen it. Now let's hit the road. There's nothing scheduled for us here today. Let's get back on the way."

But, as they were leaving Jericho, a commotion started. Someone kept shouting, "Jesus, have mercy on m. Have mercy on me."

The disciples, thinking they must have missed something in their schedule, check their Blackberries again. But there's nothing there. An appointment in Jericho? No, we're just passing through.

"Jesus, have mercy on me."

What to do? This wasn't on the agenda. They had things to do and places to be, and they had no time for Jericho. But, Bartimaeus had never checked the agenda, so he interrupts Jesus.

You know what that's like, don't you? You know what it's like to have people make a mess of your best-laid plans, of your well-crafted schedules. Sitting at your desk in your office, you've carved out just enough time to get your monthly report finished by quitting time. You know it will take every moment of your time, but if you work without interruption, you can get it done.

As soon as you type the first numbers into your spreadsheet, there's a knock on your door and in walks Sue. She begins to tell you about how tough things are at home. Her mother's health is declining and her husband's growing more distant every week. As Sue talks, your mind begins to race: "I don't have time for this. Not now. She's not in my schedule. Isn't there someone else she could talk to?"

You know what it's like when unexpected people come crashing into your best plans. It happens all the time in life. People have a way of showing up when they're least expected—or wanted.

That happens around the church too. I can still remember a Sunday when I was a teenager growing up in the church in Dallas. It was right after worship, and we were all in the fellowship hall having a big celebration banquet honoring some group of people for something. In walked a couple, obviously in need, uninvited, bringing no covered dish, hadn't been in worship, and here they came right through the front door. Talk about bad timing. Couldn't they see they weren't on the program for that day?

Bartimaeus wasn't on the program that day Jesus and his disciples came to Jericho. So when he cried out for help, people weren't too pleased. "Would you do us all a favor, Bartimaeus, and just stop yelling?"

You can almost see the disciples checking their calendars, seeing that Bartimaeus

wasn't listed anywhere, and calling out over their shoulders as they kept walking, "Bartimaeus, be quiet. There's no time for you today. Just be quiet. We're moving on. We've got places to go and things to do."

But, why is it like this, do you suppose, that when asked to be silent, Bartimaeus cried out all the more: "Jesus, have mercy on me!"

Here is where ministry takes place. Not in the carefully crafted schedules on which to-do items are quickly checked off. Not in the comfort of a program for the youth or ministry to the third-agers. Not even in a well-ordered session meeting. Oh, it can and does take place in all of those ways to be sure, but more often it seems ministry takes place in unexpected ways and places, right in the midst of our busy lives, where people are calling out for mercy.

The late Henri Nouwen told a wonderful story of a distinguished Notre Dame Professor with whom he was once visiting. The older teacher said to Nouwen, "You know, my whole life I have been complaining that my work was constantly interrupted, until I discovered that my interruptions were my work." (*Reaching Out*, p. 36)

I think that's what a friend of mine figured out late in his life. By the time I got to know him, Alfred had retired from the ministry and was running a bed and breakfast with his wife in Nolensville, TN. Frankly, Alfred is a character, and I always used to enjoy hearing him wax philosophical on any number of topics. He's the type that sees beauty in everything—from the texture of the bark on the trees surrounding his old house, to the rippling creek that runs behind it. He has a special habit of pulling you out of a crowd and secretly sharing his latest theory about what God is up to in the world.

Of all the theories he ran by me over the years, one stands out. Alfred says it like this: "I believe God has an appointment for me each day. Sometimes I'm the one who gives in that encounter. At other times, I'm the one who receives the grace. But life's been a lot richer as I've learned to watch for those unexpected moments where God's grace is waiting to break forth."

What if we learned to think about ministry in those terms? And I'm not just talking about our congregation's ministry together, but ours as individuals as well. What if each of us could heighten our senses to discern the places that God is nudging us to give ourselves away?

"Jesus, have mercy on me," cries Bartimaeus.

And Jesus stood still. It seems like such a simple statement—almost a throwaway phrase in the story. "Jesus stood still," or as one translation puts it, "Jesus stopped in his tracks."

But do you know how important that simple phrase is? This is the Jesus we see rushing from place to place through Mark's Gospel. Since page one of Mark's Gospel, Jesus has been steadfastly moving toward Jerusalem and the cross. Jesus is on the way. In almost every story, the words have been literally said or directly implied: Jesus and his disciples are on the way. They are moving toward the completion of his ministry. Moving toward the purpose for which he was sent. Moving on the way to the cross. Moving across boundaries of race and creed. Moving on the way to accomplishing what God wanted him to do. Moving, moving, moving....

“Jesus, have mercy on me!”

And, Mark tells us, “Jesus stood still.”

What a marvelous moment in Mark’s Gospel. Jesus, driven toward Jerusalem, standing still in the face of human need. And Jesus asks, “What do you want me to do for you?”

Here is where ministry takes place—away from our agendas, right in the middle of our interruptions.

So here’s what I’m thinking today. I’m thinking that there are countless folks right here in this community—our community—who are doing their dead-level best to interrupt us enough to take notice of them.

As the nights grow colder, the homeless among us—more of them than we realize, perhaps—will be looking for someone to show mercy. Our participation in the faith-community’s response, HARTS, is one way you can respond, but perhaps you have a coat or a blanket that you could give someone on the street. Or maybe you’ll start carrying granola bars in your car to share with someone looking for something to eat.

Or maybe your life is being interrupted by those who are new to this Valley—someone from another culture who is learning to speak a new language and you realize that you could be a tutor or serve as a mentor.

Or perhaps you’re beginning to hear the voices of our working poor who simply need help with how to set up a budget—something you did professionally for decades—and you begin to reach out in caring ways.

Or perhaps you’ve been interrupted by the cries from people who are dealing with the recent flooding in Georgia, or of those who have never heard anything about Jesus in their whole lives, or of those who have found themselves out of a job.

We could list the ways that we as a congregation and as individuals are interrupted by human need for days and not exhaust the list. And that’s why our ministry in the name of Jesus—both together as a congregation and as individual disciples—is so vitally important. It will, quite simply, take our very best gifts of energy, intelligence, imagination, and love. It will require a generosity of resources and of spirit.

That shouldn’t really surprise us. After all, God’s mission for the church is for changed lives—beginning with our own.

Ultimately, this story of Bartimaeus isn’t just about what Jesus did in his life that day. It’s about something else as well.

Again, Mark puts it quite simply, as he says this of Bartimaeus: “Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.”

That’s what Jesus wants us to do as well—to follow him on the way. That’s what he wants those who are ministered to in Jesus’ name to do—to follow him on the way.

Jesus wants us to follow him on the way of discipleship. To follow him into the places of broken dreams and dashed hopes. To follow him into the face of human need, so that your presence and your tears and your compassion make real God’s presence and God’s care, and your ministry—in the name of Jesus Christ—becomes the very work of God.

Come to think of it, that’s not a bad item to have on our agenda.