

**Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 25) – Year B – October 25, 2009**

**Job 42:1-6, 10-17; Psalm 34:1-8, 19-22; Hebrews 7:23-28; Mark 10:46-52**

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There's an old book called *Memories of the Mission Field*, by Christine I. Tinling. The story tells of a Swedish missionary, Mr. Tornvall, who arrives in Ping-Liang, China, uninvited and unwelcome. He realizes that he will only be accepted by providing medical help, but he has no training – only one small book and some homeopathic remedies. Nevertheless, there is an old woman, nearly blind, who is carried out each day to beg for alms. Tornvall goes daily to treat her eyes with a salve. The fact that the old woman would allow herself to be treated by the missionary set in motion a process of breaking down cultural and religious walls, whilst building relationships.

As we will see, today's Gospel is a story of transition and transformation, as well as one of faith and discipleship. And more than that there is a promise here that will help you and I to break down some of our own walls, to build up our own faith, and to answer Jesus' question to each of us, and as a community of faith. As usual, in Mark's Gospel, no detail is incidental or irrelevant. Mark's story is set outside the walls of Jericho, through which Jesus has just passed with a whole entourage of followers. There is continued tension between the insiders and the outsiders. The disciples of Jesus and the crowd of followers are teeming around Him, like a shoal of fish constantly moving around some hidden axis or center of their being. Their activity creates enough disturbance in the waters around **the** Living water that Jesus is not just buffeted by their presence, but buffered from anyone outside the group. In Mark's Gospel, the disciples are often presented as actively trying to bar others from coming to Jesus. It happened with the paralyzed man who could not get near Jesus for the crowd. Then again when John reports how the disciples try to stop the one who was casting out demons in Jesus' name because he wasn't following them. Also, when the disciples rebuke the little children for coming to Jesus, and now with the blind beggar called Bartimaeus.

Bartimaeus is an outcast. He is blind, and therefore considered *persona non grata*, one who in the eyes of his community must be a sinner. By virtue of his condition, he is excluded from full communion, lives in abject poverty, and relies on the kindness of others to survive. When he shouts, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" many in the crowd sternly order him to be quiet. Jesus has a different response to the plea for mercy. He stops and says, "Call him here." While Bartimaeus is making his way to Jesus, let's explore a couple of the details being played out here. This is the first time in Mark's Gospel that the title "Son of David" is used of Jesus. In the present scene it reveals that blind outcast Bartimaeus' understanding of the coming Messiah is a lot deeper than most of those insiders who are swirling around Jesus. This royal title pops up again in the next chapter when Jesus enters Jerusalem for the last time and the crowd shout, "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!" In this respect, Bartimaeus already seems to know what Jesus' disciples and followers have missed. Jesus is the One who brings healing and salvation through faith, and Jesus is the anointed one of God, the long-awaited Messiah in the Davidic line. This too is a transitional moment for Jesus, who is taking His last steps on his own journey to Jerusalem and the cross. Jesus is moving out of his role as itinerant preacher, teaching and healer, to a new role as the royal Son, and the rightful king of the in-breaking kingdom of God. In Jesus' incarnation, the door between the divine and human realm is blown off its hinges. Through Jesus' life and teaching, windows appear in the walls of our houses so that we may see and understand God more clearly. In Jesus' death and resurrection, all barriers to an everlasting relationship with God are demolished. Yet we are not left stranded or homeless. The bridge between God and creation, between God and His creatures is complete in Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Does the crowd of followers get it? One moment they're trying to repress Bartimaeus' appeal to Jesus, and then astonishingly, they take up Jesus' call, echoing his words, "Take heart; get up, he is calling you." From stumbling blocks, the crowd is transformed into agents of God's mercy – cheerfully drawing Bartimaeus into the center of Jesus' healing grace. This is also our opportunity for transformation as we prayerfully consider our own response to Jesus' question, "What do you want me to do for you?"

“Prayer,” said Martin Luther, “is a climbing up of the heart into God. None can believe how powerful prayer is, and what it is able to effect, but those who have learned it by experience.” Have we prayed for our eyes to be opened so that we might see who is crying for mercy in our own time and place? Have we prayed for God to show us how, by our actions or inaction, we may have blocked the way for others in their path to Christ? The pictures and voices come from near and far. There are the working poor, the jobless, the homeless and the hungry in our own community, as well as those who are differently abled and need daily help. There are also those in the two-thirds world who are stricken by widespread famine, the consequences of war, extreme poverty, and poor health. Jesus called the crowd to be disciples of His way and they respond immediately. Jesus calls me and you to the same mission of compassion and mercy, healing and deliverance, looking beyond our own needs to the needs of others, as we point the way to Christ.

Bartimaeus hears the crowd encouraging him to go to Jesus. In his excitement, he throws off his cloak. Now that is a remarkable action for anyone as poor as Bartimaeus. His cloak is his most valuable possession, even a means of survival on cold nights. Unlike the rich man who turns away in grief because of his possessions, Bartimaeus discards his cloak and his old life in order to come to Jesus and be clothed in righteousness. In response to Jesus’ question, Bartimaeus knows exactly what his prayer is, “My teacher, let me see again.” His faith makes him well. Our faith in Christ also heals. It heals us in many ways, and continues to spread the gift of healing when we too follow Jesus as faithful disciples. Bartimaeus gives us a glimpse of discipleship. He is persistent, obedient to the call, he accepts God’s gift in faith, his life is changed, and most of all he follows Jesus, even to Jerusalem. How does this story transform us, and help *us* to grow as disciples of our Lord? Do we know the deepest desire of our heart as a community, and our answer to Jesus’ question?

Our own reflections on this reading hold significant promise for extending our practice of God’s graciousness. We have much work to do in this place, as stewards of God’s gifts. What we can build together here with God’s help is more than just seating space to accommodate our expanding numbers, or new meeting rooms so that we can grow our children’s, youth and adult ministries. What we can open up here is more than just doors to our faith community, and more than just our mouths in words of welcome to new friends among us. As we prayerfully consider our vocation and ministry, and God’s call to discipleship, what we will create here together is space within each of us for more of God’s compassion and justice. Together, we will create space for growth in this community of faith, through the gift of God’s hospitality. And together we will create space through which more of God’s love and mercy will be made manifest in the world as we reach out to others saying, “take courage, get up, Jesus is calling you.” Many of our neighbors outside these walls do not yet know, or have forgotten how to answer Jesus’ question, “What do you want me to do for you?” But we haven’t. As one commentator (A.K.M. Adam) puts it, “regal authority comes to divine expression in deliverance, in persistence, in fulfilling the vocation of recognizing and strengthening one another.”

Remember the old Chinese woman and the missionary? After daily visits from Tornvall, to everyone’s astonishment, her eyesight is restored. Some time later, the city leaders call a public meeting to discuss driving Tornvall from their city boundaries. Speaking passionately the old beggar woman faces the crowd, “Do you want good people in this city or not?” she demands. “You all know me, you know that I was almost blind, and now I see. This man has helped me.” Tornvall is allowed to stay. In time, he establishes both a church and a medical center. The story of the woman and the story of Bartimaeus reveal to us how the promise of mission is fulfilled in relationships. The walls are broken down between the insiders and the outsiders. Faith in Jesus brings healing and salvation, as well as new followers of Christ. God’s gracious mercy and compassion abounds. Are you and I ready to answer Jesus’ call?

Amen.