

TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
Proper 25

October 25, 2009 B

*I always like to know what the Jesuits are thinking, which is why I subscribe to AMERICA magazine! An editorial in the September 28, 2009, issue, entitled "No Waiting Room," which I happened to read this past week in the midst of my reflection on the gospel passage of the healing of the blind beggar, Bartimaeus, led to the unfolding of this sermon. I want to thank and acknowledge the editorial staff of America for their inspiring and challenging message, which helped me to see (as I express in this sermon), my own blindness when it comes to being a more imaginative disciple of Christ in relation to **public policy issues** which affect our common life together. And, I would like to share a resource called **The Episcopal Public Policy Network** with those, who like me, need to see more clearly how we can put into action the call of our Baptismal Covenant to "strive for justice and peace among all people..."*

www.episcopalchurch.org/eppn

Job 42:1-6, 10-17

Mark 10:46-52

The blind beggar, Bartimaeus, is an intriguing character. Mark is the only writer who identifies him by name, but he doesn't tell us how old or young he was, nor how long it had been since he lost his sight. All we know is that he sat at the side of the road in Jericho where people passed on their way to Jerusalem. He had heard of Jesus. He knew that he had healed many people. He had listened to their stories. He probably knew that one of the signs of the coming of the Messiah was that the blind would see again. And that was his hope. And Jesus was his chance. And Bartimaeus knew Jesus would be walking past him today. And so, as Mark describes it, Bartimaeus shouted as loudly as he possibly could, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me." He couldn't afford to let the moment pass without at least a chance of getting Jesus' attention. "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me." He wanted to see again. And he believed that Jesus could heal him of his blindness. "What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asks. "My teacher, let me see again," says Bartimaeus.

I've been struck in recent years by what Bartimaeus does when summoned by Jesus. Mark tells us that he throws off his cloak. He risked letting go of his one precious possession while still blind, not yet sure whether or not he would be given the gift of sight. This was a pretty significant move because a blind beggar's cloak was a security blanket. It provided protection from the rain and cold in bad weather. It was a covering in which to hide from the ridicule and humiliation of the passing crowds. It served as a basket to collect in his lap the coins he received for his daily bread. It was perhaps his bed at night to keep him

warm. Bartimaeus was willing to let go of his security blanket, to step out of his comfort zone, not caring whether or not he appeared vulnerable to those around him. All he knew was that Jesus offered him a possibility of seeing – and he didn't want to miss the moment. In his physical blindness, Bartimaeus imagined the possibility of what life might be like if he turned to Jesus for healing. And he didn't let the negative, judgmental voices of those around him impede his desire to see.

I grow weary at times when I overhear the shortsighted way some people speak of others, judging people by the way they look or the way they talk, especially if they perceive others as being less 'sophisticated' than they see themselves – and I get annoyed with myself when I fall into this sort of behavior. There is so much more to each of us than what meets the eye. It takes time and energy and a mutual willingness to get to know others from 'the inside out' in the best of relationships. "What you see is what you get" is never quite true for any of us, no matter how authentic we might be as persons, because there is always more to the person we are than can be seen or observed, even by ourselves. It's why I like this quote from Nachman of Breslov, a rabbi who lived at the end of the eighteenth and the start of the nineteenth centuries: "Always look for what is good in others. Focus your attention on the positive aspect of the other, **bring it to light**, and transform the sinner into a holy person." It's what Jesus did for Bartimaeus. It's what he did for his disciples. And it's what Jesus does for us today, who ask, like Bartimaeus, "My teacher, let me see again."

Of course, I'm not talking here about physical sight as much as I am about seeing with imagination, the possibilities we otherwise miss without it. I often wonder whether or not this is why Jesus had such a hard time getting his disciples to understand the many different stories he told about the kingdom of God. Did they listen with their imagination, for Jesus used his imagination in telling them who God was and how we are meant to live together. He practiced what I discovered as 'the Storyteller's Creed' some years ago, in the preface to one of Robert Fulghum's books. It states: *I believe that imagination is stronger than knowledge. That myth is more potent than history. That dreams are more powerful than facts. That hope always triumphs over experience. That laughter is the only cure for grief. And I believe that love is stronger than death. ("All I Really Need to Know I learned in Kindergarten," Robert Fulghum)*

And I personally have come to believe through my own experience that it is more important to see with our imagination than it is to understand with our minds, the transforming grace and power of God at work in us through Christ. The final chapter of Job, our first lesson today, doesn't impress me because God makes nice and Job lives happily ever after – even if at the end of the story Job still doesn't really understand the mystery of suffering! What impresses me about the end of the story is that Job is finally able to imagine what was

unimaginable in his relationship with God. And because of this, Job's eyes are opened and he sees the world and himself from a new and transformed perspective. And his life changes for the better.

In many ways we are like Bartimaeus, lacking much we don't have and blind to many things, in need of being in touch with our ability to imagine things not as they are, but as they might be - as Jesus did.

My eyes, for instance, have been opened through the years to the blindness of our health care system - and not just through pastoral visits to overcrowded emergency rooms near parishes I've served both in the Northeast and here in the South. Most, if not all, of the close to 400 recipients of our Food Pantry Ministry each Thursday who, live in households without enough food are probably among the 46 million people in the United States who have no health insurance. I've only begun, more in recent years than in past years, to recognize my own blindness when it comes to being a more imaginative disciple of Jesus in relationship to *public policy issues* which affect our common life together. What do we see or hear when, for example, we witness the present debate in our country concerning health care reform? Do we see health care as just another commodity to be distributed according to people's ability to pay? Do we make political party loyalties a priority? Do we even care? Or do we see health care through the lens of the message of Jesus, who had a preferential option for the poor and sick, like Bartimaeus?

Looking through the lens of Jesus and his universal concern for all God's people, I begin to see more clearly how powerful special interests have a stake in the status quo - and I feel that the church needs to do more than just pray that our elected officials check their egos and partisan interests at the door and work together for a just and reasonable reform of a system in need of repair.

Why should we care about this? Isn't this bringing politics into the pulpit? Perhaps, but more to the heart of the vision of Jesus, we, in the recitation of our baptismal covenant, are asked if we will "strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being." We respond, often with enthusiasm and conviction, "I will, with God's help." The terms of our baptismal covenant are quite clear. Seeing and imagining how we put this into action requires more than a little measure of vision.

Jesus, the Divine Physician, healed Bartimaeus. And because of his faith and trust in Jesus, Bartimaeus imagines new possibilities he never could have realized if he simply sat quietly, the rest of his life, at the side of the road, helplessly dependent on the generosity of strangers. Instead, he shouts out, knowing he had an opportunity he didn't want to miss. And he was willing to risk some security for it to happen.

We can't heal like Jesus healed Bartimaeus. But like Bartimaeus, we can ask Jesus to take away our blindness. We can beg Jesus to help us see ourselves and the world in which we live through his vision. We can, with God's help, re-imagine health care as a basic human need, no less a religious duty than providing food for the hungry, shelter for the homeless and clothing for the naked.

It's one of the ways we take up the cross and act as servants of Christ on behalf of the least among us.

Lord, help us to see.

Amen.

Bob Hudak