

"GETTING JESUS' ATTENTION"
(Sermon by Rev. Don Parsons)

Scripture Lesson:- Mark 10: 46 - 52

// Earlier this week I attended the annual conference of Queen's Theological College -- an opportunity for some significant continuing education (this year's theme "Religion and the Public Sphere"), and best of all, the gift of reconnecting with friends.

One of those friends -- a minister in a small church near Belleville -- was telling me about the after-school program which his church provides for elementary school children in the community.

They gather in the church hall for games, help with their homework, friendly conversation. Jamie was telling me that as he was helping an eight year old with her homework recently, she pointed to the print of Sallman's "Head of Christ" hanging on the end wall, and seriously asked "Did he used to work here?" //

Well obviously this little girl had no idea who Jesus is, and yet her question for me is a profound one. I wonder if that question was asked in this space, how we would respond...

Has Jesus ever worked here? Does he still?

And if Jesus is at work in this place, how do we know that?

Where do we see evidence of his presence?

Perhaps the Sunday of a Lay Ministry Fair is a good time to ask.

This morning we join Jesus and the disciples as they are passing through Jericho, on their way to Jerusalem. Jericho is a bustling city, fifteen miles from the capital, and the roads especially at Passover, are clogged with merchants and tourists.

So this is obviously prime time for beggars by the roadside.

Many pilgrims - usually in a generous mood - slowly move on their religious journey towards the Holy City.

One of the beggars by the roadside is a blind man whose name is Bartimaeus.

He sits with his cup in his outstretched hand, and we can imagine his patter:-

"Could you spare some change for a blind beggar?"

And when he hears the clink of the coin in his cup, "God bless you," he says into the darkness. "Have a great day."

On this day, in the midst of the noisy confusion of the throng of people, he hears someone say, "Here comes Jesus!" Now this is a name known to Bartimaeus.

He has heard about the healing ministry of this teacher from Nazareth, and it does not take him long to realize that this is his chance. So he seizes the moment.

"Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

"Hush! He has no time for the likes of you! Shame, Bartimaeus! Hustling a rabbi for change! Keep quiet! Can't you see we're trying to build a kingdom here?"

But he will not be silenced. This blind beggar is determined and persistent and cries all the more loudly:- "Jesus, notice me! Over here! Have mercy!"

And then Mark pens what I think are two of the most beautiful words in all of scripture:-

“Jesus stopped...” He stood still.

This blind beggar on the fringe of the crowd had succeeded in getting Jesus’ attention.

“Bring him to me,” says Jesus. And when the two of them are face to face with each other, the Teacher from Galilee asks, “What do you want me to do for you?”

Now at first blush that seems a silly question. The man is blind. He has to beg to support himself. Jesus has a reputation for healing. It seems obvious what needs to happen here.

But the question still hangs there.

Jesus wants to hear Bartimaeus name exactly what he wants, what he needs.

So the blind man sums up his heart’s desire:- “Master, let me receive my sight.”

And Jesus replies, “Go your way; your faith has made you well.” It is a moment of grace.

Just like that. Just words – no mud, no potion, not even a touch.

Bartimaeus closes his eyes and when he opens them again a whole new world is presented to him.

It is a beautiful story. One of my favourites.

Notice that there is no ambivalence here. All the verbs are strong and clean –

Bartimaeus *cries* out, *springs* up, *speaks* straight from his heart.

His belief that Jesus can do something for him is unwavering.

And did you notice that as soon as his eyes are opened, he becomes a disciple, and follows Jesus on the way.

Well, may I lift up a couple of things about this familiar story?

For one thing, this Bartimaeus story is for all of us who want or need to get Jesus’ attention.

Because the question – “What do you want me to do for you?” -- is not only directed at this blind man. It is also asked of us.

How you would respond to a question like that?

What kind of healing of body, or spirit, or mind, or heart would you claim for yourself...?

Something that might take the ache away?

Something that would dissipate the cloud that hangs over your life,

or make your grief more manageable, or mend a broken relationship,

or forgive some secret you have for too long buried deep within...?

Maybe as it was for Bartimaeus, perhaps Jesus wants to hear us say exactly what we want, what we need, how much we believe God can do for us.

// In Anne Tyler’s novel, *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*, Ezra Tull decides to open a restaurant in Baltimore, and cook what people really want – what they are homesick for – hot tacos for a Mexican neighbour; barbecue for a guy from Georgia.

One woman tells Ezra how homesick she is for her late grandmother’s mashed potatoes.

“It’s not just the potatoes I yearn for,” she says. “but the joy of being together. Those mashed potatoes are a symbol of the love and comfort of my grandmother’s home.” //

// So let’s think out of the box for a moment, and imagine the church as a kind of “homesick restaurant”. Jesus, wearing an apron, comes to wait on your table.

“Are you ready to order,” he asks. “What would you like this evening?”

We stammer and ask for more time to look over the menu.

We're not always sure what it is we want, what it is we are homesick for. He is patient. "Escargot?" he suggests. No, that's not exactly "homesick" food. "How about our roast beef, Yorkshire pudding, mashed potatoes, warm cherry pie the way your grandmother used to make it? Maybe even with a piece of aged cheddar on the side." Well that's more like it. Sounds terrific. We're nervous about the price because when we look over to the right-hand column where the prices are supposed to be there are no prices. (I'm always a bit nervous in restaurants that don't print the prices on the menu.) He notices our anxiety, this Christ in the apron, and says, "Don't worry. This one's on the house. Welcome home." It is a moment of grace... //

And then do you realize that among all the others who were healed by Jesus, Bartimaeus is the only one whose name we know. Now why do you think that he is remembered by name these twenty hundred years later? Could it be that it was his "following Jesus" that made him unique, that as the disciples moved about the country, sharing the teachings of Jesus, there was old Bartimaeus always sitting in the midst of them, eyes dancing, grinning from ear to ear? The gift was so precious, so life-changing, that he had no choice but to tag along with them. Being with Jesus and his followers was now the consuming passion of his life.

I wonder if that is another way of describing who we are as "church"?

That we are a motley gathering of individuals who, like Bartimaeus, have somehow experienced the presence, the attention of Jesus.

The church is a gathering of those who believe, however cautiously, that Jesus does still work here, that he lives here, teaches and heals and comforts and challenges us here.

And how does that happen?

// Well today's Lay Ministry Fair offers us a clue. What you will discover after church is that this is more than just a series of displays. It is really a smorgasbord of opportunities we are being offered to live the life of Jesus in this place.

It is my conviction that we experience the presence of Jesus in each other, and in all the ways we, like Bartimaeus dare to follow, and share in the life and work and outreach and worship of this local chapter of the Body of Christ. //

We know that sometimes our experience of "church" is one of great joy - balloons in the air, barbecue on the lawn, choral music lifting us to the very throne of grace, the ministries for children and youth, seniors and everyone in between helping us all to feel honoured and valued and included as members of the Body of Christ.

There are times when we recognize that this is our "home".

But there are also times when things are difficult; when we become so weighed down by our concerns and challenges that it is easy to become discouraged. The danger is that our anxiety about the future - waiting for the call to a new minister for instance - could threaten to overwhelm our life and mission in the present.

But we are the Body of Christ here, now, in *this* place, at *this* moment! So we dare not lose heart!

// The Iona Community of Scotland enjoys a partnered relationship with a small black church in South Africa who have accepted as their mission the challenge of standing with people who have AIDS. Recently, Kathy Galloway, the head of the Iona Community made a visit to this courageous church. She was royally welcomed, and shared in worship that was full of rhythmic music and fervent prayer.

As she turned to leave, she noticed painted on the back wall over the main door of the church a banner, similar to those we have seen in rural churches here -- ("Worship the Lord in the Beauty of Holiness", or "Come into God's Presence With Singing" painted along the arch at the front of the church.)

This banner on the back wall over the main door of this South African church had only three words. Do you know what they were? "Never Give Up!"

Every Sunday, as that congregation moves from the nourishment of worship to live in a challenging world of AIDS, and war, and violence, and economic uncertainty, the word they carry with them, their commissioning is just this:-
"Never Give Up!" //

In a way, when Jesus paused to pay attention to Bartimaeus, it was his way of saying to this blind beggar, "Never give up. God's grace is available to you!"

Perhaps that is his word to us, as he lives, and moves, and yes works among *us*, even in our ministries here today...

"Never give up..." Amen.