Pentecost 22 Proper 25

Mark 10:46-52

October 24, 2021

 Some years ago, I was in a group that was talking about what it means to trust in God. One of the people said, “If you’re going to pray for rain, carry an umbrella.”

 I suppose the Oregon version of that is, “If you’re going to pray for rain, carry your raincoat and wear waterproof shoes.”

 Either way, his point remains valid. If we’re going to pray for something, we should expect God will act.

 The hard part is that God doesn’t always act the ways we hope for. Which is a topic for a whole other sermon.

 In our Gospel reading today, we have the story of Bartimaeus, a blind beggar. He seems to have been of the same school of thought as my friend with his umbrella.

 The story of Bartimaeus, at first glance, seems like a simple healing story. But it is, I would argue, a lesson in discipleship.

 Bartimaeus hears that Jesus is walking by. He starts to shout, trying to get Jesus’ attention. And when he finally does, Bartimaeus throws off his cloak and jumps up, because he *expects* that Jesus will show him mercy.

 A cloak was a valuable thing for a beggar like Bartimaeus. It could keep him dry, keep him warm, protect him from the sun, serve as a pillow under his head. It would have been snapped up in a hurry by one of the other beggars nearby.

 For this act of trust, Jesus commends him for his faith, restoring his sight. And Bartimaeus joins the crowd that follows Jesus on the way.

 Let’s think about that crowd for a moment. It includes Jesus’ disciples. And they’ve not come off looking all that good over the course of the last few chapters. As Jesus has tried to explain to them what’s going to happen—what *needs* to happen—they are more concerned about status. And they seem to relish the role of gatekeepers, as if it’s their responsibility to determine who is worthy of getting Jesus’ attention.

Time and again, Jesus has to offer them guidance and correction about what it means to be his follower. And as they struggle to put his teaching into action, it’s those considered to be outsiders who demonstrate actual faith.

 And Bartimaeus would definitely have been considered an outsider by the crowd.

His blindness would have been seen as punishment for someone’s sins, and since he says, “Let me see *again*,” the crowd would easily have concluded that it was his own sin that led to his blindness.

 The disciples and the crowd, acting as the arbiters of who is worthy of Jesus’ time—and, by extension, mercy—***order*** Bartimaeus to be quiet. He needed to stop bothering Jesus.

 You would think that those who had listened as Jesus taught, watched him heal people, perhaps even been healed or blessed by him themselves, would want *everyone* to be able to experience that.

 Yet they continued to shun those whom Jesus longed to welcome.

 Despite the crowd’s desire to keep people they could classify as less important from being near Jesus, being a follower of Jesus comes with only one piece of instruction: love as we have been loved.

Everything else Jesus says and does unpacks what that means.

But, “for as long as human beings have been declaring devotion to a God of love,” we have been messing it up “by being hateful in the process.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

 Now, it may seem harsh to say that the crowd was being hateful. But I think we can certainly agree they weren’t being loving.

 The problem is that it’s far easier for us to identify the ways *other people* sin than to acknowledge the ways we wander from the path of discipleship.

And it’s hard for us to love as we are loved, because it’s hard for us to *trust* that we are loved.

 That’s because we feel like we have to earn God’s love. Which, again, is a whole other sermon…probably next week’s.
 But it is love, and love alone, that has the power to heal our wounded hearts, to turn our enemies into neighbors, and bring us to wholeness.

 In his book, *Following Jesus*, Henri Nouwen writes about how we are wounded people. We are full of fear and anxiety, and these keep us from experiencing wholeness. From feeling loved or lovable. From experiencing joy or wonder.

 And because we are wounded, the love we offer others always comes with conditions and expectations.

 Nouwen says that love has the ability to turn our enemy into our neighbor. Hating people, he says, gives them power over us because they occupy space in our minds. Our antagonism toward others keeps us from knowing peace.

 But, and I want to really emphasize this, learning to love our enemies does *not* mean allowing them to do as they please. It means learning to be invested in their well-being, just as we are invested in the well-being of our neighbor. And it means giving up our tendency to divide people into categories of good vs. bad, worthy vs. unworthy.

 As long as we cling to those divisions, we cannot truly love as we are loved. Because God creates no such distinctions.

 In the first *Matrix* movie, Morpheus, the teacher, tells his protégé Neo, “There is a difference between knowing the path and walking the path.”

 We, who are called to the path of discipleship, who are called to follow Jesus on the way, know this all too well.

 It is hard for us to love as we are loved. To give up our desires to judge. It’s hard for us to let go of the things that keep our wounds from healing. It’s as if our hearts are like an old car that looks like it’s being held together by rust. If we let go of our bitterness and anger, if we let go of the divisions that organize the world into tidy groups, what will we have left?

 Faith and love.

 That’s what we’ll have left.

 Faith that allows us to trust that God will provide for our needs and be merciful to us. Love that frees us from fear, frees us from the burden we bear because of our woundedness.

 *That* is what God offers us. *That* is the love that Christ came to share with us. It is God’s perfect love for us that frees us from fear, frees us to love without condition or exception.

 May our hearts be open to receiving this love, which heals our wounded hearts, that we may be instruments of peace for a broken world.

1. *If God is Love, Don’t be a Jerk*, John Pavlovitz, p. 7 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)