

Proper 25, Year B[Jeremiah 31:7-9](#)[Psalm 126](#)[Hebrews 7:23-28](#)[Mark 10:46-52](#)**Standing Blindly with Jesus**

As you heard before we began, it's social media Sunday, so feel free to use those smart phones during my sermon in appropriate ways: take a picture, share an insight, whatever strikes you. And, no, setting an alarm on the stopwatch to warn the preacher that his time is up is not helpful.

So much of life today is facilitated by our technology, and that's not a bad thing. I don't wear a watch anymore because my phone is my watch. Not only does it tell me the time, but it can give me a heads-up that it's 15 minutes before my next meeting. A text from Catt can remind me to pick up a last minute dinner ingredient on the way home. I can track my daily exercise on it and see what kind of progress I'm making. I can take pictures of my kids and share them with my friends and family. When I'm at the Car Doc waiting for my oil to be changed I can read a book or an article on it. When I get lost the GPS can help me find my destination. The smart phone is an incredibly useful tool! So here's a question I want you to think about on this particular Sunday: if our smart phones and Facebook, Instagram, and other social media platforms facilitate that much of our life, and our relationships with others, why not use it to help facilitate our relationship with God?

One of the ways to do that which we've just started trying this week is what some refer to as a hybrid faith formation group on Facebook. Some of the men of St. Paul's are doing a book study like we've done many times before, but online. We're

reading C. S. Lewis' *Mere Christianity* and instead of meeting every week we're sharing insights through a private Facebook group, and we'll meet once at the end of the month to debrief. People's schedules are so packed that we're seeing what it's like to be able to discuss on our own schedules by using the available social media to help facilitate our relationship with God and each other.

One topic that's come up in our discussion this week is Lewis' point that there's a Moral Law beyond ourselves, and that Law is "not simply one of our instincts." Imagine, for instance, that you hear a scream, and you realize someone is drowning. Two different things will begin to compete in your mind: first, the instinct to keep yourself safe because you don't want to drown, and trying to save a drowning person will put you at risk. The other instinct is the instinct to help. Lewis points out that it is "at these moments when we are most conscious of the Moral Law, it usually seems to be telling us to side with the weaker of the two impulses." There are two instincts at work (stay safe, or help), but there is a third thing that is not merely an instinct. It's something else urging us toward the helping instinct, urging us, as Lewis says, to the weaker of the two impulses.¹

Our discussion of this on Facebook reminded me of this week's gospel lesson, the story of Jesus and "Bartimaeus, Son of Timaeus," a blind beggar. Isn't that interesting that Mark names Bartimaeus, even mentions his father? Why would Mark do that, because we almost never learn the names of people Jesus heals in other stories? We hear that Jesus healed a leper, or a centurion's slave, or a Syrophonecian woman's daughter, but it's never quite so specific. Was it because Mark and Bartimaeus were Facebook

¹ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Harper One, 1952), 10.

friends? Sort of! Most scholars will say it's because this is real history. Bartimaeus was someone people (at least people in Mark's community) actually knew.

It's in the interaction between this Bartimaeus, the crowd, and Jesus that I see something like what Lewis describes in his book. Here's what Mark tells us: "As [Jesus] 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!'" Now, before we get to Jesus' response, I want us to pay attention to the crowd, and possibly the disciples, because it's unclear who the "many" are, but Mark writes, "Many sternly ordered him to be quiet." Maybe they were trying to keep this beggar from bothering their teacher. Maybe they thought Jesus wouldn't want to associate with someone like this, a roadside beggar who had obviously fallen from grace. We learn from the story that he was not always blind, because he asks to see *again*. We know he was someone's son, possibly someone of respect. Wherever his story he was a just a beggar by the road now, and we wouldn't want him bothering Jesus. So they ignore him, or try to shut him up.

Are we any different from these particular followers of Jesus? When the homeless person at the stop light holds up her sign, I know that sometimes I wish I didn't see her. When people in need come to our door here at the church during the week, sometimes the staff try to keep them from bothering me when they think I'm busy. Or how about when you encounter someone new, maybe even someone new at church? You might feel nervous about talking to them if you don't know them because maybe they're

different from you.

Two different choices, one of which is easier, safer, or more advantageous for us. The other of which, as Lewis says, is decent behavior, which, he writes “does not mean the behavior that pays.” It’s that second instinct in our minds that says, “I should roll down the window and offer her some change, or at say good morning.” “I should try to help the person at the door in need.” “I should introduce myself to the person in the pew behind me and try to make him feel welcome.” And we know that beyond this instinct that there is something else urging us toward this position of vulnerability.

Listen to what Mark tell us about Jesus’ response to this scene: “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.’” Jesus. Stood. Still. The crowd is all around him, they’re probably all asking him their own questions, but he, of everyone present, hears and responds to Bartimaeus’s cries. He stood still. He stood for Bartimaeus, and then he tells them, like the urging we feel in our hearts, “Call him here.” Suddenly, everything changes, and they know what they should do. Those who were silencing blind Bartimaeus the beggar moments before are now encouraging him toward Jesus. Jesus then offers Bartimaeus, and those who are following him, healing, wholeness, restoration of relationship with the community, and a new purpose.

We all know it’s problematic that Bartimaeus is excluded and discouraged from seeking Jesus.² But we also know that, sometimes, like Jesus’ followers did that day outside of Jericho, we exclude people based on the stigma of who they are, and because

² Lincoln E. Galloway, *Feasting on the Word (Kindle Edition)*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, vol. 4, *Year B, Season after Pentecost 2 (Propers 17 - Reign of Christ)*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), Loc. 7799.

we're afraid of placing ourselves in a position of vulnerability. The church, sadly, has a long history of this. A set of Vestry minutes of one particular church in our diocese from the 1960s was found a few years ago containing a resolution that if "certain people" entered the church the ushers were to redirect those persons to St. Luke's, our historically black parish in Treme. I don't know if that Vestry was a group of men seething with hate as we might like to imagine them as a way of making ourselves feel better, as much as I think it was a group of men suffering from their own spiritual blindness. In Jericho on that day long ago, it was those following Jesus, those right there with him, who were truly blind to who he was, rather than the man who cried out from the margins. It makes me, as a contemporary follower of Jesus, a sinner like the disciples of old and like the Vestrymen of that church in the 1960s, wonder sometimes what my own blindnesses might be of which I am completely unaware.

In addition to our attempts at finding ways to use social media to facilitate our relationships with God, we are also doing some challenging exploring on Wednesday nights over the next four Wednesdays, and it's called "Race Matters: Sensitive Conversations on a Difficult Subject." The discussions surrounding the Confederate monuments in our city, for example, or recent protests over police shootings in the black community, or news about the rise of the mass incarceration of black men, have brought into earshot voices from the margins of our lives that we may not want to hear. To stand still and to listen means placing ourselves in a position of vulnerability. What I hope is that you will muster your courage and take the time to join Bishop Gray for some discussions that may open our eyes and reveal some spiritual blindness we may have to the way our neighbors experience the world. Those blindnesses don't mean we're

horrible people, but rather that we've just never had the eyes to see. Because we've never taken the time to stand still and listen.

The Gospel teaches us again and again that, as our patron Paul says, "God's power is made perfect in weakness." True power, he says, comes by setting aside our power and privilege just as Jesus did. That doesn't mean we necessarily have to lose ourselves completely all the time, but in certain moments, here and there, again and again. That takes real strength, because there are two voices in my head that push and pull on each other, and one of them is weaker than the other and needs help. When I hear a story like the one about Bartimaeus it makes me realize how much I need Jesus to be the one encouraging that weaker voice, standing with it, refusing to let me walk on by in favor of the more convenient thing, or in favor of the things that helps me hold on to my perceived power. It's only by my continued following of Jesus that I have hope of my sight growing clearer, because he is that third something in my heart urging me to be strong enough to choose the weaker voice. Urging me to stand blindly with Jesus.

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