



Westminster Presbyterian Church Knoxville, TN
October 27, 2024
The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble
Sermon: "Made Well?"

Mark 10:46-52 (NRSV)

They came to Jericho. As he 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!"

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." So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus.

Then Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" The blind man said to him, "My teacher, let me see again."

Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

"Made Well?"

Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, shouts out to Jesus
...and *many sternly ordered him to be quiet.*

Over and over, in the gospels the crowds restrain those most in need of Jesus.

People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them.

The disciples see a crowd of 5,000 in a deserted place and they ask Jesus to *send them away so that they may go...and buy something for themselves to eat.*

Jesus sits down to dinner with those most at the margin of his community and the Pharisees ask the disciples, *'Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?'* (Matthew 9:10-11).

Sometimes, the crowds don't even notice what they are doing, as they block access to Jesus:

[Zacchaeus] was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature (Luke 19:3).

Some people came, bringing to [Jesus] a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof and ... let down the mat on which the paralytic lay (Mark 2:3-4).

To some extent, I get it. Because, I've had a similar reaction, when people have asked me if Jesus can heal them.

When I was interfaith hospital chaplain, I was often surprised at some of the requests I would get.

One time, a Romanian Orthodox family, had trouble reaching their priest, so they asked me to recite prayers at the bedside of a very sick man from their worship book...which was in Romanian. I don't really know what Romanian is supposed to sound like, but I know it wasn't supposed to sound like whatever sounds came out of my mouth, as I butchered the pronunciation of the prayer book. I got through about a page, before the family politely told me, 'Thank you. That is enough.'

Most of my hospital work was done in New Jersey and Pennsylvania, where there are large Catholic populations. I always loved it when I walked into a room and someone mistook me for a priest and called me 'Father.' When that happened, I knew two things: (1) these people were actually going to pay attention to me and listen to me, and (2) they were going to want me to recite the 'Our Father.'

The request I dreaded, the one I hated to get and hesitated to fulfill, was to pray for physical healing, to pray for a loved one to get better.

I don't begrudge the request. When I'm sick, when I'm in pain, certainly when someone I love is sick or in pain, I also pray for healing.

But when you're a hospital chaplain, and you've seen case after case after case, of bad turning to worse, of people not leaving the hospital, you don't want to be the guy, who prayed for healing that never comes.

I don't know if that's why the crowds *sternly ordered [Bartimaeus] to be quiet*, when he called out for Jesus. Maybe they thought Jesus wasn't interested; or Jesus was too busy; or maybe they just didn't want to get the man's hopes up. I get it.

But whatever they thought, they were wrong.

Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?"

Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well."

Let me be honest with you. As a former hospital chaplain turned congregational minister, I find this story frustrating. It seems to suggest, that faith is a transaction. That if you believe hard enough, or if you ask in the right way, your faith will heal you, just like that. In just a few words from Jesus.

Maybe it's just a bad time for me to come across this lectionary text, the Sunday between two funerals in less than a week at Westminster Presbyterian Church.

I had a similar thought, by the way, about the Scripture I selected for Chip Herzog's funeral. Last Tuesday, we read Psalm 91, which Dave just read to us. I didn't have space in the homily to say this, but I chose that Psalm, in part, because Chip was an American history buff.

And there's an interesting history of troops keeping copies of that Psalm in their pocket, as they go out on the battlefield:

*You will not fear the terror of the night,
Or the arrow that flies by day.
A thousand may fall at your side,
Ten thousand at your right hand,
But it will not come near you.*

Again, I think about the contrast, between the images of Scripture and the vicissitudes of life. How many soldiers fell on the battlefield, with that Psalm in their pocket, proclaiming God's protection?

Two things should be said here:

The first is that neither the Psalm nor the Gospel says that faith will prevent bad things from happening to us. Bartimaeus lives the life of a blind beggar, and it appears he had faith long before he was healed. Likewise, the Psalm proclaims protection on the battlefield but it doesn't say you won't be placed on a battlefield in the first place. In both cases, the central affirmation is that God and Christ accompany us in and through adversity. They don't stop adversity from coming to us in the first place.

A second point is related: in each instance in the Gospel, where people try to prevent others from approaching Jesus: with Bartimaeus, the little children, tax collectors and sinners, the paralytic, even Zacchaeus, the central affirmation of each of these texts is that Jesus most wants to be around those who need him most. He surrounds himself with those who are hurting in his community, those outcast on the streets, those whom no one else wants to associate with, those with little status, poor reputation, a checkered history.

And this tendency of Jesus, to seek out and center those most at the margin, causes us to rethink healing. What exactly was it that healed Bartimaeus? The restoration of his sight, certainly. But much more, it was the fact that Jesus called him, out from obscurity, away from those who held him back. It was healing, when Jesus showed he was worthy, that he was loved.

That was healing for Bartimaeus. I have to think, also, it was healing for those who were holding Bartimaeus back, those who were worried that the blind beggar was not worth Jesus's time. Calling Bartimaeus forward, Jesus sought to change, not just Bartimaeus, but the whole structure, the whole idea that there should be a margin and a center, and inside and an outside. Jesus was trying to break it all down and create a community, where before, there had only been segregation.

This past Thursday, our Westminster staff and members of our congregation attended the 'Carry the Torch' fundraising event for the Volunteer Ministry Center, VMC. The keynote speakers for the event were the celebrated writer Tracey Kidder and Dr. Jim O'Connell, President of Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program and Assistant Professor of Medicine at Harvard Medical School.¹

¹ Volunteer Ministry Center, "Carry the Torch." <https://www.vmcinc.org/carry-the-torch>

Kidder, who has written a book about Dr. O'Connell and his program entitled *Rough Sleepers*, gave a brief speech and then interviewed the doctor about his program and how he got into medical care for those experiencing homelessness.

O'Connell told a story about taking a year-long placement in a shelter program caring for Boston's homeless population, when he was young, fresh out of residency. The nurses there told him, when he started, that to be effective in that place, he had to unlearn much of what he had learned in medical school. In the hospital, you move fast: exam, diagnosis, treatment, repeat. In the shelter program, you move slow, because you've first got to earn people's trust, to make any kind of difference in their lives.

He started in the clinic where they soak people's feet. As you can imagine, living without reliable healthcare or a place to stay, is awful on your feet, and part of the treatment is just to let them soak.

So, here's Dr. Jim O'Connell, recent graduate of Harvard Medical School, fresh out of residency, soaking the feet of the people of Boston without a home. He said, that for the most part, the people he treated rarely noticed him, didn't even realize he was a doctor. But one day, there was this man, with severe edema in his feet, swelling so bad, they actually had to use two tubs, one for each foot. And this man looks at him, and he says, 'What are you a doctor? What are you doing here?' [Remember this was Boston. The man used more colorful language than that. I'm paraphrasing.]

Dr. O'Connell responded, thinking 'Yea! What am I doing here? That oncology residency I passed up had to have been better than this.'

Over time, he said, his attitude changed. He realized, the work he was doing at the shelter was actually more effective, for the people living on the streets of Boston, than the work he had been doing, with and for these same people, in the emergency department of the hospital.

Because in the hospital, you go fast: exam, diagnosis, treatment, repeat.

Repeat. Repeat. Repeat.

You repeat that cycle over and over, with no better outcome, because when you discharge someone without a home, you put a Band-Aid on an open wound. To be effective, you have learn to go slow. When you take the time to earn people's trust,

when you take the time to show them that they are worthy of your attention, then you can actually start making a difference in people's lives.

I don't know, if helping that man soak his feet actually helped heal that man.

But the process, of soaking feet, soaking feet, taking time, getting to know the people who lived on those streets, that healed Dr. O'Connell. It set him on his life's work.

Who was healed, in the interaction between Jesus and blind Bartimaeus? Bartimaeus, certainly, but also the crowds, those living under the illusion that Jesus wouldn't care for a man like that.

Healing like that, is not a quick fix. It's not a transaction. It's certainly not a reward for who believes the hardest or the most purely.

That type of healing happens, when we go slow, instead of moving so fast. It's healing, to let someone know they aren't invisible. Whether they live on the street, or they're the kid sitting alone at lunch, or the new person in your neighborhood, or the neighbor you haven't checked on in a few months. We can look people in the eyes and show them they are worthy of your time.

It is healing, also, for communities of faith, to take the time, to ask questions: like, why is there, on any given night, over a thousand people living in our town without a home; why is there persistent structural inequality based on the color of your skin still today, in our schools and between our zip codes? Why is there always an inside and an outside?

It is time to rethink healing.

I know, right now, our nerves are shot, thinking about an election, where it seems everything is riding on what is going to happen, on a Tuesday night in November. I know, right now, so many of us are exhausted, trying every day, to show love and care in a world that seems bereft of love and care, where progress always seems incremental, and things keep falling apart.

Remember, no matter what happens on Nov. 5.

Remember, when it feels like nothing you do, seems to make the difference you wish it would make.

Remember, healing, is not a quick fix. It takes time.

It takes time to show and be transformed by Christ's love.

The most healing thing Jesus did, on that street leaving Jericho, wasn't fixing Bartimaeus's blindness. It was taking the time, to talk to him, to ask the question, "What is it you want me to do for you?" After every else tried to shoo him away.

This is the healing work that Jesus keeps calling us to, to break down the barriers, to dissolve the difference between the margin and the center, to empower those without voice, to ensure everyone knows and is treated as the child of God they are.

No, it is not a quick fix. It is slow and constant work. It is a faith that we are called to renew every day.

But in the face of all the powers that seek to maintain our unequitable status quo, we nonetheless affirm:

 this is what we are called to;

 this is the way to life.

 This is the faith that will make us well.

In Christ's name, may it be so. Amen.