

“On the Way”
A Sermon by Rev. Victoria ByRode
The Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time
October 25, 2009
Scripture: Mark 10:46-52

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION: *Gracious God, as we gather here this morning to hear and think about your Word to us, we ask that you would still in our minds all other voices but your own, that we would hear what you would have us hear and then live as you would have us live. Amen.*

Some have said that the Gospel of Mark is one long passion story, one long account of Jesus on his way to the cross. And that would be a somber enough thought for us, if it were true that Jesus walks toward his cross alone. Yet the Gospel of Mark becomes even more somber. Jesus doesn't walk alone; rather he invites others on their way to suffering and death right along with him.

Mark's key phrase for the gospel is “the way”. Time and time again ordinary folks are asked to walk with Jesus on “the way”. Mark's whole Gospel is structured as a journey. Jesus does all of his teaching in this Gospel on the run – on the move. Another of the distinguishing words of Mark's Gospel is “immediately” Things happen quickly and Jesus rushes from one thing and one person to another. And according to Mark, if we are to be taught by Jesus, we, too, need to be on the move.

That insight sheds light, I think, on today's Gospel reading – the story of Jesus' healing of blind Bartimaeus. It's not at all unusual to hear of a healing in Mark's Gospel. What is unusual, though, is that we know the name of the man who is healed. Most of the time when Jesus heals someone in Mark's Gospel, we know them as a woman, or a man, or a ruler, or the daughter, and we never hear of them again. The fact that we know Bartimaeus' name has led many commentators to think that

this man continued to be known by the Christian communities. He is remembered, they surmise, because he, unlike the others, “followed Jesus on the way”.

He had been blind his whole life. He had never seen the sun rise, or gazed into the faces of his family, or been able to support himself by the labor of his hands. He was blind. He was known as “Blind Bartimaeus” – that's what they called him his whole life – “the blind son of Timaeus”. His whole life was named by and defined by his disability.

Most of his friends and family stayed in their little village, even though they heard that Jesus was passing close by. After all, they were in reasonably good health, reasonably well fixed. But Bartimaeus was desperate. He desperately needed something which only Jesus could give. So he made his way to the roadside, hoping to get near Jesus, because he had heard that Jesus was a healer, a doctor who could cure him of his disability.

And, miracle of miracles, Jesus saw the blind beggar standing by the roadside and healed him. In a wonderful instant Bartimaeus was given his sight. In a moment he saw the world which everyone else had seen all their lives. Wonder of wonders – Jesus the worker of wonders healed him.

Have you ever wondered why Jesus performed miracles? Most people would assume that Jesus performed miracles in order to get people to believe in him. William Willimon, who served as pastor for Duke University for several years, though, tells of the time someone in one of his Bible Study classes questioned that assumption. What the young man said was, “If that's why Jesus healed people, then it didn't work. How many of the people whom Jesus healed followed him? How many do we never hear of ever again?” It's a good question, isn't it?

Jesus told Bartimaeus to go back home and begin living his life as a “normal” person.

And a man like Bartimaeus surely deserved to live the rest of his life in peace and tranquility after the way he had been forced to live the first part of his life.

But, do you know what? If he had gone back home to begin his new life, we would know no more about him than we know about the countless others whom Jesus healed. Bartimaeus must have followed Jesus. He must have become a disciple and been known and remembered when Mark wrote his Gospel. Otherwise, we would not know him as Bartimaeus, but only as the blind man. But they remembered him.

“Bartimaeus? Sure we remember him. He used to teach at First Church Galilee. He met, and was healed by Jesus, and he was never the same again. Certainly we remember him.”

Bartimaeus, though he had been blind, really saw. He saw that Jesus was about more than simply healing. Jesus was about discipleship. Bartimaeus saw that Jesus, in healing him, had invited him to follow along the way. And because he followed Jesus, we remember his name, even today. He once was blind, but he really saw who Jesus was. To know, to see, and to believe in Jesus is to “follow him on the way”. His way is not meant simply to be praised, to be admired, and adored. His way is meant to be walked. Bartimaeus is remembered by us because he “got it” – he followed Jesus “on the way.”

Next week we will be commemorating “All Saints' Sunday:” And while we “reformed” Christians don't believe in saints the way in which some of our Christian brothers and sisters do, we do believe in saints. Our definition, actually, goes well with today's sermon. For us, saints are people who walk with Jesus – love God and neighbor – and who share what they have with each other.

With that introduction, let me tell you that one of my favorite saints is Clarence Jordan. I have referred to – and even read from – his

version of the Bible which he called “The Cotton Patch Bible”. But, in addition to that – and actually even before that – Clarence Jordan, thinking that he was “supposed to do what the Bible said”, founded a community. As Jordan read book of Acts in the New Testament, he noticed that the first Christians were what we might think of as “communists” - not atheistic operators of gulags, but people who held no private property. They shared everything in common, living together, pooling resources. Jordan decided that he would use this community as a “blue print”. He bought a farm in rural Georgia and invited others ...some white, some black. This he did in the early 1950’s when McCarthy found communists under every rock, when Americans had not even begun their agonizing work toward Civil Rights and integration. He named the community, located outside of Americus, GA, “Koinonia Farm”.

The difficulties – excommunication from the Southern Baptist Church, vandalism, cross burning, legal pressures, to name just a few – led Clarence Jordan to turn to his brother, Robert Jordan, who served as a Georgia state senator and a justice of the Georgia State Supreme Court. Robert, however, refused to help.

He said, “Clarence, I can’t do that. You know my political aspirations. If I represented you, I might lose my job, my house, everything, I’ve got.”

To which Clarence responded, “We might lose everything, too, Bob.”

“It’s different for you.”

“Why is it different? I remember, it seems to me, that you and I joined the church the same Sunday as boys. I expect when we came forward the preacher asked me about the same question he asked you. He asked me, ‘Do you accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior?’ And I said, ‘Yes.’ What did you say?”

“I follow Jesus, Clarence up to a point.”

“Could that point by any chance be – the cross?”

“That’s right. I follow him to the cross, but not on the cross. I’m not getting myself crucified.”

“Then I don’t believe you’re a disciple. You’re an admirer of Jesus, but that is not a disciple. I think you ought to go back to the church to which you belong, and tell them that you are an admirer not a disciple.”

“Well now,” Bob replied, “if everyone who felt like I do did that, we wouldn’t have a church, would we?”

“The question, in my mind, is do you have a church?”

M-m-m-m.

My friends, it is relatively easy to claim Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. It is not so easy, though, to follow him “on the way”. Bartimaeus, was not simply healed, but he also followed. He became one of the very first disciples. And he became for us a model of true belief in Jesus a model of true discipleship. To believe in Jesus means to follow Jesus on “the way”. May it be so for you and for me. Amen.

Thanks to: David Augsburger for his book, “Dissident Discipleship: A Spirituality of Self-Surrender, Love of God, and Love of Neighbor”, and William Willimon for his sermon, “On the Way” and King Duncan for his sermon, “Good News about Faith.”

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