

Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost, Year B
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
The Rev. Ian Burch
October 28, 2018

A boy named Clem lived close to me when I was in elementary school. I actually don't remember anything about him other than he was a few years younger than me, and he had a funny name. This was the late 80s, so the name Ian was a little peculiar. But Clem? Clem was, and is, just a strange name for an eight year old kid. I thought of Clem as the kind of name that you'd expect to find on someone wearing overalls and chewing on a stalk of wheat during the Great Depression. The name Clem was old fashioned and absolutely anachronous. I often wondered what caused his parents to give him a silly name like that. I hope I didn't tease him about it, but I probably did.

I don't know what happened to Clem. I hope that he is content and wise and successful wherever he is and that no one teases him about his name.

You see; I know something now that I didn't know back then. Clem is, of course, short of Clement. It's a name that pops up a lot in the history of the church, though typically a thousand years ago for pope and saints. Clement, in case you haven't guessed, means mercy. We grant clemency when we are being lenient with a prison sentence. When the weather is sunny and warm, it is clement. When it is rainy and nasty, we call it inclement. Clem, it turns out, is a rich, beautiful name.

I had Clem on my mind when I read the gospel this week. In the story, a beggar named Bartimaeus sat by the roadside outside of Jericho. As Jesus and the disciples were leaving that city, Bartimaeus cried out for Jesus to have mercy on him. People rushed over to Bartimaeus to get him to pipe down — to be quiet and to let Jesus and the disciples pass. Bartimaeus was undeterred and cried out for mercy again. This caught Jesus' attention, and Jesus asked Bartimaeus what he wanted. Bartimaeus asked to have his sight restored, and it was so.

Most bible editors call this scene, "The Healing of Blind Bartimaeus." Which is true, as far as it goes. But you could just as easily call it, "The Man who asked for Mercy." I was struck, not by his blindness, but rather by his courage. Bartimaeus sat on the side of the road, and, though blind, he could somehow see what it was he needed — in the person of Jesus — right as Jesus walked by. And then he had the guts to yell out to a stranger and ask for mercy.

Can you think of a time when you were so wretched that you needed mercy? Maybe it was guilt, or grief, or despair. Perhaps it was worry over a child or a friend. Maybe you're having some of that right now, I don't know. But I think most of us can relate to the idea of being at the end of one's rope; or being so broken that the only response is to beg — to beg for mercy.

What a humiliating moment that is. If you have experienced it, you know that it's an utter surrender to the idea that we are broken and in need of help and healing. It's not so much that

you have become wise and know that you need God. It's more than the world has crushed you and the only avenue left is the mercy of God. The anguished need for mercy cuts through ego, and it cuts through a lifetime of self-deceit. If you've ever been at the bottom, you know what Bartimaeus was feeling, and you know the courage it took him to cry out, asking for mercy.

And he found it. Or rather, mercy found him, in the person of Jesus. Like most good healers, Jesus, asks Bartimaeus what he needs.

At my last parish, the veneration of the cross on Good Friday was a more pronounced observance than it is here at St. Mark's. There was a tradition there of coming and kneeling in front of the cross and laying one's burdens down. I saw CEOs and power consultants get on their knees in front of the cross of Christ and weep as they laid down whatever it was that was clinging to their souls. I watched people, in real time, come to the cross and beg for mercy. And, I watched over and over, as that mercy was granted.

Surely we live our lives differently knowing that God's mercy is as available to us as it was to Bartimaeus. That it is as available to us every day as it is on Good Friday. There is nothing that you cannot bring to God. There is nothing that God doesn't know about you, and, miraculously, there is nothing that you can do or say that will remove you from that divine mercy. That's the very nature of God — to provide clemency when we likely don't deserve it.

As much as we need the mercy of Jesus as individuals, we need it collectively as well. It would seem, given the news of yet another shooting, this time in a house of worship, that there is a great deal that we cannot see. And our need for the mercy of God grows daily. Pray for Pittsburgh, and may God have mercy on all of us in this nation.

If you plan on having sons or daughters, may I suggest you name them Clem. Or if you have to name a car, or a street, or a dog, or a lake. Name it Clem. We could use all the reminders we can get that the mercy of God is available to us abundantly and always. Amen.