

Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost, Year B  
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI  
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Dear Friends in Christ,

Our readings today summarize and give insight into the hope of the Christian Gospel. This Gospel is our hope, our own story and truth. We are all like Bartimaeus in the Gospel reading: we are poor, blind, sick, suffering, and yet through our weaknesses God has chosen and called us to be reconciled to God, to others, and to all creation. Do we have the courage to cry out like Bartimaeus? Are we in touch with our weakness, our blindness, like he is? Do we know how desperately we need healing?

Jeremiah gives us a grand image of God's restored world. God will draw together his people, the remnant of Israel, from the far reaches of the Earth. There is no place to flee that God is not present, no private hideout or land in which God does not seek out God's creatures, the poor and the lost, and bring them into healing and wholeness with God and others.

"I am going to bring them from the land of the north,  
and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth,

among them the blind and the lame, those with child and  
those in labor, together;  
a great company, they shall return here."

Perhaps you feel far from God. Maybe you are experiencing spiritual dryness, relational disfunction, physical suffering. We may feel lost in a strange land. Who am I? What am I doing here? None of us have clear, obvious answers to these questions. We are all metaphorically or literally blind and lame. Yet that very weakness is also our opening to God and to others. If we have the courage to weep, we are promised that God will wipe the tears from our eyes, will draw us from north and south, east and west, to Jesus's table of fellowship and hospitality. God is reaching out to us, calling to us. We work out this call in fear and trembling, in the intense confusion and pain of being human. As our Psalm today says,

"Those who sowed with tears  
will reap with songs of joy."

This is no easy assurance or promise. This promise asks us to dwell with the chaos of the world and our own internal chaos, personal, communal, and social sorrows and tears. Do you have an unfulfilled desire, hope, or dream? Do you long for something that seems ever out of reach? Do you yearn for a wholeness that you have come to think is impossible? We must go to the bottom, to the pit of our fear, insecurity, and

uncertainty, in order to be rescued. God can only wipe away the tears that we are willing to weep:

“With weeping they shall come,” says Jeremiah,  
“and with consolations I will lead them back.”

Our Christian hope is rooted in the incarnation: God has become a human creature who weeps with us, who mediates God’s love to us. Jesus represents, manifests, and activates God’s love and purposes for creation. This is the function of a priest: to communicate God’s purposes, to join and link God and with God’s people. Which turns us to our reading from Hebrews.

Of course, this kind of priestly system is prone to corruption. The priests of Israel were frequently corrupt, abusing their power and authority. How can we say that someone has the power to speak for God, to proclaim what God wants, to organize a people or a religious community? Institutions we all probably know, can hurt, frustrate, manipulate, and control. This even or especially includes the Church. We are, in many ways rightly, suspicious of institutions in our day. They have not earned respect but rather distrust.

Yet the reading from Hebrews points to what is different about Jesus’s priesthood. As we read, “The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office; but Jesus holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. Consequently he is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.”

All our communities are historical, finite, and incomplete. We are together on the way, on a journey which stretches on before us. We have not arrived, either as individuals or as a community. This is a warning to never think ourselves perfect, superior or others, or supreme. The priesthood of Israel was ordained by God, yet death was always near. It was a constant and never-ending struggle to maintain order: there was corruption, as mentioned, and there was also death, the death of priests, the death of ceaseless cycles of sacrifice. And the Church on earth is equally plagued by such challenges whenever it departs from pointing and adhering to Jesus, the one true priest.

For Jesus perfected the priesthood, he lived it out once and for all. He is the full, perfect manifestation of what our priests, our leaders, our institutions are supposed to be. He is both perfect priest and perfect sacrificial offering, an offering of his whole self to God the Father. The Church is built not on itself, not on its own perfections and achievements, which are always prone to human pride and corruption. Instead, the Church rests on a concrete, historical source outside of itself: Jesus Christ, who offers himself to us at his table. His priestly sacrifice is completed, he lives forever with God. We, the Church of Christ as individuals and as a community, are drawn ever further into Jesus’s life as we are joined to his movement towards God the Father. We receive Jesus’s gift of himself at this table. By this gift, we are empowered by the Holy Spirit so that we can sacrificially love others as Jesus did and still does through us.

Yet living into Jesus's way of sacrifice is risky and painful. Which brings us back to the first readings: consolation only comes through weeping; our true identity is only discovered through our relations with others, relations which are often difficult, perplexing, and uncertain. When we vulnerably trust others, even when we trust the Church, we are sometimes hurt, let down, left vulnerable and confused.

Turning finally to the Gospel Reading from Mark 10, we see a large crowd following Jesus. This crowd, I think, represents or symbolizes the Church. We are a large crowd, a gathering of people from north and south, focused on following Jesus.

Yet how quickly we come to think of ourselves in a privileged position! That we know exactly who Jesus is and what he wants! We only allow in what fits into our own framework. Which means that we may not have room for others, those whom we dislike, disagree with, or don't understand. When a Bartimaeus calls out into the crowd, perhaps we are inclined to "shush" him. Everyone one of us and every one of our communities runs this risk: what voice of longing, of hurt, of pain, of desire are we unwilling to hear?

Yet Bartimaeus is exactly the courageous and hurt person who is close to God, close to Jesus's own heart, Jesus's own desire. Bartimaeus is the one who is closest to healing and wholeness because he sees how sick and broken he is. He has no shame. His entire being radiates with desire for God, for healing, and no institutional or religious pride keeps him quiet. "Son of David, have mercy on me!" he repeats.

We need human community. We need the institution and structures of the Church. We need priests and leaders. But community always has the tendency to exclude and reject, to tell people to be quiet.

In our age we need to hear passionate calls for God, inarticulate desires for healing, health, restoration, wholeness. We must not be satisfied with any finite reality or protections of our identity: laws, communities, political movements, parties, or leaders. These are not the things that draw us to God's purposes revealed in Jesus. For Jesus, the fundamental qualification for receiving his gift of healing is that you are eager for it, that you know you are weak and sick and need to be restored from beyond your own strength and abilities.

Yet Jesus also respects Bartimaeus. Jesus involves Bartimaeus in Bartimaeus's own journey of healing. Jesus calls him to himself, he asks him what he wants. God's healing hand does not impose itself on us. God wants *us*, God wants you and me to be the people we are created to be, with our unique freedom and gifts we have to offer to God and others.

In response to Jesus's summons, we read that Bartimaeus "threw off his cloak." This symbolizes how we need to throw off everything that hinders us from vulnerably coming to Jesus. We clothe ourselves in protective garb. We think we can secure ourselves against others, against hurt, against confusion. Those securities need to go. That is the

only way to approach God and Jesus, to be healed and made whole. Neither we as individuals nor our communities can be whole and complete by our own efforts. Our churches, cities, our nations all have an emptiness at their core, a wound which is never finally healed, certainly not by any finite reality. Do we have the courage to throw off our defenses, those false, shallow identities that keep us from God and each other? Are we aware of this wound, this emptiness?

Jesus says to Bartimaeus, "Go; your faith has made you well." Yet upon being healed, Bartimaeus does not go. Instead, he follows: "Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way." Our healing should result in following the one who heals. Healed by Jesus's hands and words, we are healed into his new community. We are not healed to go about our regular existence as if nothing has happened or changed. We are healed in order to have our ordinary existence transformed into an extraordinary existence, renewed, empowered by the Spirit to follow Jesus. In his light we can live as a new community, a different kind of institution, as people and relations empowered by his Spirit. Christian relations are not to be relations of mutual exclusion or collective pride, but are rooted in our common weakness and brokenness, how we have been healed and are still being healed by God in Christ.

Christ still offers himself to us in the bread and wine of his table and in the holy presence of our brothers and sisters who join us there. We need to approach the table in the same way that Bartimaeus responds to Jesus: eager, persistent, in full knowledge of our need and brokenness. When Jesus calls us to himself we need to shed our cloaks, our false, angry, prideful, or fearful protections. Yet embracing our weakness opens us to hope and strength. As we are transformed and healed we can in turn transform and heal the world around us, embodying Jesus's love. We only truly encounter God and one another when we let our personal and communal defenses down. Solidarity is forged between us here and with those beyond our walls not through ideology, not by holding identical perspectives, not even through moral heroism, but by being in touch with our own and with others' desperate need for God.

For this is how our Psalm concluded today: "Those who go out weeping, carrying the seed, will come again with joy, shouldering their sheaves." We must come to the table weeping, with the smallness of ourselves, our seeds, our offerings. By the work of the Holy Spirit our weakness and frailty, our small seed, is transformed into the power and harvest of love, into the living flesh and blood of Jesus. Amen.