

Proper 25, Pentecost XXI October 24, 2009

One of the silliest things we can do with the healing miracles of Jesus is to think that the most important thing about them is whether or not they happened just exactly the way they are recorded. If we do that, we can end up thinking that believing, or not believing, the New Testament account exhausts the meaning of the story. The only question is “do you believe that?” That’s a great loss; one that truly impoverishes scripture.

Now, I personally am convinced that Jesus was a healer—that is one of the few things that everyone who talks about Jesus in the New Testament agrees with. But the miracles of healing that are preserved in the Gospels are there because they are much more than examples of neat things Jesus did. They’re included because they have some important things to say that reach far beyond the recitation of an exceptional event.

The healing of blind Bartimaeus is an excellent case in point. No doubt it’s a true story; or based on a true story. But that’s only one level of meaning—and there’s a lot more going on here. For Mark, Bartimaeus is a symbolic figure who operates on lots of different levels; and his contribution to the Gospel story goes way beyond the gift of sight he received. I want to look at just two of those levels; one having to do with what we get, another with what we give.

The first level of meaning, about what we get, has to do with what Jesus said to Bartimaeus. Remember the story. Here is this blind man, off to the side, not really a part of the life going on so close to him. He’s an embarrassment to himself—and to the people around him. But he’s stuck. That’s the way it is; that’s the way it’s always been; and there’s no real sign of change on the way. Then Jesus shows up, and everything was up for grabs—as it always is when that happens.

And for that one glorious moment Bartimaeus is able to forget himself enough to reach out to Jesus.

He was able to ignore those voices that told him to stay where he was, to stay as he was. He was able to move toward Jesus in spite of the fact that he saw nothing. And when he got there, he found himself met with a question. “What do you want me to do for you?” Name the pain that brings you here. Name what you are willing to give up.

That can be a hard question; and it’s always an important one. Now, it may be easier to answer if what separates you from the life you want is obvious and physical, like blindness. It’s certainly harder if the issues are of a different, less obvious, sort. Still, the question is an important one for anyone who seeks the healing love of Christ.

From time to time people off the street come by my office with fascinating tales of woe and abuse. “Here is my problem and no one will help me—welfare mistreats me, friends rip me off, the hospital ignores me, somebody stole my ID, and so on.”

And much of the time, that is what’s going on—the need and the problems are real. But every now and then, a little digging shows that the help is really out there; but the folks don’t want the change that such help involves. It’s so much easier to stay sick, to stay isolated, to deal with a comfortable, familiar pain.

The choice to stay sick, to stay abused, to stay in a place, or a situation, or a state of mind, that’s destructive—this is not reserved to people off the streets. We all know the temptation, if not the experience, of choosing to hang on to a familiar pain. Health might involve losing comfort, excuses and sympathy we just aren’t willing to give up. It might give us both responsibilities and duties we don’t want to accept. So we stay where we are.

“What do you want me to do for you?” Sometimes the honest answer is ‘nothing’—and that’s usually what happens. We hide from the real issue, the real need. Our truth stays buried under layers of shame, denial, pride, or fear.

And we walk around it—we ask for someone else to change—for someone else to get better or to get hurt. We locate our problem somewhere (indeed anywhere) outside of ourselves. We deny what is the truth about ourselves, and we look to others. We avoid Jesus' demand that we face honestly our need.

You see, healing means change; it means we have to face the demands of health. So we lie, or we pretend, or we seek to have a symptom changed, or an inconvenience removed. But the first step in our healing may well involve answering Jesus' question—speaking aloud our true brokenness, our real pain, and our deepest need. Lots of times, there can be no real healing without new decisions about what our lives mean—and about what's really wrong, and where we go from here.

So Bartimaeus represents all of us as we, like him, are called to what is often painful honesty at the feet of Christ. What we get often has to do with what we ask for. That's one level of meaning.

The second has to do with a different form of blindness—our blindness; and with what we often fail to see. Back to the story: Jesus was leaving Jericho and a large crowd followed him, listening to what he had to say, asking him questions. Now, to accompany a rabbi along his way was considered a pious, worthy action. It was a little like going to church. Also, since the Passover was drawing near, many with Jesus were no doubt pilgrims, devout folks fulfilling their religious obligation to celebrate the holy season in Jerusalem.

All in all, this was most likely a very religious group of people, asking theological questions, doing proper churchy things, and not unaware of their own religious righteousness. They were doing good—they were going to Jerusalem *and* listening to Jesus both.

And there was a disturbance, a distraction. Somebody—a nobody, really—was trying to take Jesus’ attention away from them and the good and holy stuff that they were doing. A blind man, a smelly beggar, was making a scene. They tried to ignore him, and that didn’t work. So they tried to shut him up. They tried to pretend that his poverty, his need, his demand for attention and help, that these really weren’t there.

The good religious folks walking with Jesus just didn’t want to hear the cry for help that came from outside the gate from the fringes of their life and their world. They wanted to pass by.

It is their blindness—their blindness to the need so close at hand they had to shut their eyes to avoid seeing it, that Jesus judges when he stops, and tells them to pay attention to some ugly pain a few feet away.

Jesus’ decision to pause on his journey to Golgotha and to offer a word of hope and of healing is a reminder of how easy it is for us to become blind, to refuse to see and to reach out, to close our eyes to the pain and need in front of us, and to the cry to Christ that comes from that need—a cry that comes also to us.

This story of the blind Bartimaeus is really a story about the road to Jerusalem—the road Jesus walked, and calls us to walk. On that road we vision—vision to see the way of service and discipleship, vision to identify and name our need to Christ, and vision to see the pain and the hurt we are called to serve.

Such vision is a gift of God, an offer and an opportunity for us. It’s there for the asking. And with that gift comes an invitation. “Go your way” Jesus said to Bartimaeus. “And immediately he received his sight, and followed Jesus.” Into new life, which is the gift Jesus most wants to give.