

TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Cross of Glory Evangelical Lutheran Church

Faith Opportunities

Mark 10:46-52

Then they came to Jericho. As Jesus and his disciples, together with a large crowd, were leaving the city, a blind man, Bartimaeus (that is, the Son of Timaeus), was sitting by the roadside begging.⁴⁷ When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"⁴⁸ Many rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"⁴⁹ Jesus stopped and said, "Call him." So they called to the blind man, "Cheer up! On your feet! He's calling you."⁵⁰ Throwing his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus.⁵¹ "What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asked him. The blind man said, "Rabbi, I want to see."⁵² "Go," said Jesus, "your faith has healed you." Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road.

Would you consider yourself an optimist or a pessimist? You know the difference, right? An optimist sees a bright future. A pessimist sees only gloom and doom. An optimist sees the glass half full. The pessimist sees it half empty. The optimist says, "My cup runneth over. What a blessing!" The pessimist says, "My cup runneth over. What a mess!" I'm sure that some of you consider yourselves optimists and some pessimists. And the world needs both. We need optimists to create airplanes. We need pessimists to create the parachute. When it comes to spiritual matters, however, God doesn't leave us with an option. As we see again in our gospel reading today, Jesus always gives us a reason to be spiritually optimistic. Even the direst of circumstances in life can be viewed as faith opportunities when seen from the proper perspective.

Our reading this week picks us directly where we left off last week. If you recall last Sunday, we witnessed Jesus having a discussion with his disciples while he was on his way up to Jerusalem, where he would be betrayed and put to death. This week, we see him a little further along the road on that same path. He arrives at the city of Jericho. As Jesus is leaving the city, we first meet the man who is at the center of this account—a man named Bartimaeus. The one thing we learn about this man is that he is blind. Being blind in that culture was a very miserable existence. We've come a long way in helping the blind and other handicapped members of our society so that they can try to live as well as possible. In that time, being blind meant you were condemned to an existence of begging for food on the outskirts of society. People often looked down on those who were blind, attributing their ailment to some sin they must have committed in life to bring this upon themselves. This man Bartimaeus had every reason to be a pessimist. He had every reason to be bitter against God and blame God for his problems. He had every reason to shout to Jesus, "Jesus, Son of David, how could let me live this miserable existence?!?" Rather, he cried out, "*Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!*" These were words of faith, spoken with the confidence that Jesus could do something to help him and that Jesus would help him because of his mercy and compassion.

After Bartimaeus cries out to Jesus he receives some very bad advice. Many in the crowd tell him to be quiet. We aren't told what their motive is behind trying to silence Bartimaeus. Perhaps Jesus is speaking and they want to be able to hear what he has to say. Perhaps they are simply annoyed with this beggar and just want him to quiet down. Perhaps they doubt that Jesus actually was going to do something to help him and were telling him, in essence, to just give up. Whatever their reasons, these people were giving Bartimaeus the worst advice possible. They were telling him to shut up his faith and be content to live in despair. If Bartimaeus had listened to their advice, his disease would have not only handicapped his body, it would have destroyed his faith as his hope gave way to despair.

So what is the handicap in your life? What is the trial that has been weighing you down lately? It may be a physical ailment or disease. It may be a struggling relationship with someone close to you. It may be financial difficulties. None of us live a life free from hardships. Just because we are followers of Christ does not mean that our life is free from problems. Every one of could tell our own tale of woe. Maybe our situation isn't as bleak as it was for Bartimaeus. Maybe it is. But whatever the case, we all experience some suffering from time to time. How do we handle that suffering? There is a part of us that wants to handle our suffering the way the crowd advised Bartimaeus to handle his—by giving up. There is a part of us that wants to see our situation as hopeless. “Why even cry out to God for help? He hasn't seemed to do much for me lately. If I'm going to get out of this situation successfully, it is going to be because of my own strength and ability to solve my problems.” When we allow sinful thoughts such as these, we are allowing the devil to use our suffering as a tool to destroy our faith. The end result of such thinking is to ultimately give in to spiritual pessimism, give up on God and despair.

That is not the path we want to walk down. God would have us seek out a different path. It's the one we see Bartimaeus walk (or rather run) in our reading. It's the path that leads us to Christ not away from him. When the crowd told Bartimaeus to be quiet, he didn't take their advice. It was not an option. His faith would not allow him to. Rather, he cried out even louder, “*Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.*” And a miracle happened. Jesus stopped and listened to his cry. That in and of itself is a miracle. That Jesus would stop and take the time to listen to this man's cry is a sign of his undeserved love and compassion. The people didn't need to tell Bartimaeus twice that Jesus was calling for him. At once, Bartimaeus threw off his out garment and made his way to Jesus as quickly as he could. This was his faith in action. When Bartimaeus arrived before Jesus, the Savior gave him yet another opportunity to show his faith by asking him the question, “*What is it you want me to do?*” Bartimaeus said simply, “*Rabbi, I want to see.*” This was not mere wishful thinking. Bartimaeus knew the one with whom he was speaking. He trusted in Jesus' power to heal and he fully relied on Jesus' compassion for his situation. Jesus did not disappoint. Jesus had compassion and Jesus restored Bartimaeus' eyesight. It now become clear why Bartimaeus had spent those hours in darkness without eyesight. It was for this moment. It was so that he could have the opportunity to place his faith in Jesus for healing and so that Jesus could have opportunity to reveal his power by healing Bartimaeus.

When we spend hours in the darkness of trial and hardship, there is a similar opportunity for us to place our trust in Jesus. It's in those times of pain and suffering. It's in those moments when despair is at the doorstep that our faith has an opportunity to show itself clearly. It's one thing to say that you rely on God when everything is going well. It's another thing to place your complete trust in God when the situation seems hopeless. But isn't that perhaps the very reason that God

allows such difficulty to come into your life? It might be that only in the time of great sorrow can we learn to cry out in faith, “*Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!*” It is a cry that we know will be answered. How can we be certain of that? We know the one who hears our prayers. We know that our God is a loving and compassionate God. He has shown it to us again and again. We see his love on display in our reading today. We see his love in the way he took the time to deal compassionately with Bartimaeus and answer his cry for mercy.

Remember where Jesus was headed. He was on his way to show his love to its greatest extent by dying for the sins of the world on the cross. That is where he answered the world’s cry for mercy. This Savior that loved the world and died for the world’s sin loves each of us as individuals and forgives our sins. Beyond that, he deals with us compassionately by answering our prayers in the way that is best for us. It might be bringing the solution that we want as in the case of Bartimaeus. It might be permitting our suffering to linger and drawing us in even closer to himself. Whatever the answer, we know that there is no better place for us to turn in our hardship than to our Savior.

And so we return to our original thought of optimism versus pessimism. When viewed in the light of God’s mercy, we realize that we can always be spiritually optimistic. We have cause for hope when we know that the Savior who brought sight to the blind hears our cry for mercy as well. The greater the suffering...the greater the opportunity for our faith to shine. Ultimately, it isn’t our faith on display, however. It is the object of our faith that counts—our compassionate Savior Jesus. May we look to him for our help at all times and every circumstance of life until the day he takes us to be with himself in heaven. **Amen.**

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