

“What do you want me to do for you?”

Mark 10: 46 - 11: 10

March 28, 2021

A Sermon Preached by Reverend Debbie S. Osterhoudt

For my father’s 83rd birthday – which, as it turns out, was his last birthday – my sister and I gifted my father a one hour flight in a propeller plane. Dad served in the Air Force when he was a young man, but, because he was color blind, he never had an opportunity to fly in a propeller plane. His job in the Air Force was to design runways; helping pilots to take off and land safely. But he never flew one of those planes. Beth and I both have a paralyzing fear of heights, but we arranged for Dad’s birthday flight, determined to join him as he checked this wish off his bucket list. I was living and serving as the Pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Milledgeville so our flight would take us over the one-time capital of Milledgeville and the surrounding lake area. The day we arranged for our flight was a crisp fall morning, sparkling blue skies. As we took off and the tires left the runway, I was immediately overwhelmed with how gloriously beautiful, quiet and peaceful it was. To be high above the ground and see the world as God might see the world was truly a gift to us. In the skies, we could expand our ability to see our world and broaden our horizons. We could entertain the truth that on the ground we might be limited in our ability to see our world from a big picture perspective. It was a wonderful opportunity which we were able to share with my father on his birthday.

This morning I invite us to consider our world from God's perspective, take to the skies, broaden our vision, and expand our horizons.

We are going to consider the events of Jesus' last week of life, as he entered Jerusalem for the final time – beginning on what we call Palm Sunday. But I invite us to back up just a bit and consider also, the story of Jesus' encounter with a blind man who was living in Jericho, which was just a few miles outside of Jerusalem – a blind man by the name of Bartimaeus. Bartimaeus is the last person Jesus will heal in the Gospel of Mark. And he is the only person seeking to be healed who is given a name. This is a significant story occurring immediately before Jesus enters Jerusalem for the final time.

Prayer for Understanding:

The story of Bartimaeus is the last healing to occur in Mark's gospel. The Bartimaeus episode actually serves as the culmination of a section of Mark's gospel in which Jesus confronts not only the physical blindness of Bartimaeus but more significantly, the spiritual blindness of his closest followers, and perhaps you and me today, who have failed to fully grasp the truth of who Jesus Christ is.

Bartimaeus knows that he is diseased. He recognizes, even in his physical blindness, that he is in need of healing – physical and spiritual. The first step toward healing and wholeness is coming to an awareness of our disease – that which makes us unable to be the whole people of God. It may be physical; it is more likely that our disease is emotional or spiritual. What is causing our blindness? I believe much of our spiritual blindness occurs when we focus on what we do not have, or the nature of our

disease, instead of on what God has given us and what God can do. Many times our disease is driven by fear. An awareness of our dis-ease; of what is hindering our ability to be the people God has created us to be. If this past year, when we have endured the affects of a global pandemic, has taught us anything it has brought to our awareness our individual and corporate dis-ease/blindness. These are a few of the lessons I have discovered:

That we are all interconnected – my health is dependent on your actions and your health is dependent on my actions.

We are meant to live in community but our culture has promoted individualism.

We fear scarcity. The toilet paper hoarding continues to baffle me. The truth is that God does and will continue to provide for what we need and we need not hoard. Our tendency to hoard – to take more than is needed for life – impacts the ability of others to live.

We suffer from disparity – not all of us are treated equally in our communities.

As Jesus enters Jericho, Bartimaeus cries out to Jesus, recognizing him as the Son of David. “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.” Bartimaeus becomes, after Peter’s confession, only the second person in the gospel to address Jesus by such a title. This blind man sees who Jesus really is. Jesus has the power to heal him; to open his eyes. And Jesus asks him, “What do you want me to do for you?” With that question lingering in the air, Bartimaeus throws off his cloak and moves toward Jesus – a bold action indeed. A cloak might have been a beggar’s only possession, and a blind man who

tosses something aside in a crowd may never find it again. Bartimaeus is casting aside everything he possesses to follow Jesus.

People of God, what do you want Jesus to do for you? Do you believe him to be who he says he is and that he has the ability to heal our diseases/our blindness? Have we asked Jesus lately? Have we articulated what we want Jesus to do for us?

In sum, after a whole series of episodes in which the disciples do not get it, here, just before Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, is someone who gets everything right. Bartimaeus recognizes Jesus as the Messiah, gives up everything, asks only for his sight, and follows Jesus on the way.

From Jericho, Jesus will journey on to Jerusalem where he and his disciples will celebrate Passover. As Mark describes Jesus' entry into Jerusalem it seems almost like a parody. Jesus is not riding on a royal thoroughbred but a donkey. It is not even his own animal but a borrowed one. He has no saddle, so that people have to throw their coats on the donkey's back. They cry out, like Bartimaeus, "hosanna" which literally means "save us." They proclaim the "coming reign of David; the one coming in the name of the Lord." The animal he rides has never been ridden before, as traditionally reserved for the king. As Martin Luther once said:

"Jesus sits not upon a proud steed, an animal of war, nor does he come in great pomp and power, but sitting upon a colt, an animal of peace fit only for burden and labor and a help to man. He indicates by this that he comes not to frighten man, nor to drive or crush him, but to help him and to carry his burden for man."

In Mark's gospel the folks that are gathered around Jesus for this strange carnival like procession, are those who have been with him as he has traveled the countryside and

the cities – healing, preaching, teaching. They are the ones who shout “hosanna” - “Save now”. This is an enthronement procession, although Jesus must have looked a little odd, riding a small colt, with his feet dragging in the dirt. Maybe Mark intended Jesus’ actions to be one of parody – mocking the established authorities one final time before he is put to death; lampooning the powers that be and their pretensions to glory and dominion. He enacts an alternative to their way of domination inviting those around him to imagine a new way of living in the world. A new way of seeing.

One day a professor entered the classroom and asked his students to prepare for a surprise test. They all waited anxiously at their desks for the exam to begin.

The professor handed out the exam with the text facing down, as usual. Once he handed them all out, he asked the students to turn over the papers.

To everyone’s surprise, there were no questions – just a black dot in the center of the sheet of white paper. The professor seeing the expression on everyone’s faces, told them the following:

“I want you to write about what you see there.”

The students, confused, got started on the inexplicable task. At the end of the class, the professor took all the exams, and started reading each one of them out loud, in front of all the students. All of them, with no exception, defined the black dot, trying to explain its position in the center of the sheet. After all the answers to the question “what do you see” had been read, the classroom grew silent as the professor started to explain:

‘I am not going to grade you on this. I just wanted to give you something to think about. No one wrote about the white part of the paper. Everyone focused on the black dot – and the same happens in our lives. We have a white piece of paper to observe

and enjoy, but we always focus on the dark spots. Our life is a gift given to us by God with love and care, and we always have reasons to celebrate – nature renewing itself everyday, our friends around us, the job that provides for our livelihood, the miracles we see every day. However, we insist on focusing only on the dark spot – the health issues that bother us, the lack of money, the complicated relationship with a family member, the disappointment with a friend. The dark spots are very small when compared to everything we have in our lives but they are the ones that pollute our mind. Take your eyes away from the black dots in your life. Try to see your world from God’s perspective. Enjoy each one of your blessings, each moment that life gives you.”

This morning I would challenge you, just as I challenge myself, to consider your life and our life together as a family of faith from God’s perspective. Do we believe that Jesus Christ has the power to heal all our blindness – physical, spiritual or emotional? And do we recognize our blindness? When Jesus comes riding into our lives and asks “What is it you want me to do for you”, how will we respond?

“Give us the faith to believe, not in the guarantee of a happy ending but in the continuation of a story which always answers with good news. Amen.” (From the Correybella Community)