



CATHEDRAL *of the* INCARNATION

Bartimaeus, Matthew Shepard, and the Tree of Life: Sermon on Mark 10:46-52

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Many of us keep our deepest, darkest feelings shut up inside. We don't mention them to God or to anybody else. We pretend that things are all right. Or at least we pretend that they are a lot better than they are.

And then when the terror, grief and shame become too much - we simply cannot maintain our composure. We cannot keep it all in. We must speak - we must shout, for help. We must ask, out loud, for mercy.

"God, I am losing it!" seems an appropriate prayer. "Reclothe us in our rightful minds for Jesus Christ's sake!" Amen.

There is often a conspiracy of silence in the face of terror and grief. It is a conspiracy that leaves the vulnerable feeling alone, desperate for mercy.

This reality is richly expressed in our gospel story today. The story of blind Bartimaeus.

Some of us can imagine better than others how life was like for Bartimaeus. How isolating, how difficult. Not only is he a beggar, he's a blind beggar. He relies completely upon the guilt of strangers for his daily bread. He can't see to get out of the way of horses or crowds. He can't duck when a drunk stumbles by to hit him upside the head.

Bartimaeus has every reason to despair. He is pitiful. And yet. And yet...he possesses an extraordinary spiritual gift. He is not afraid to ask for help.

As Jesus and his disciples are departing Jericho, Bartimaeus shouts out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

And the disciples don't like it. "Shut up!" they say. "Be quiet!" they say. "Shhhhh! We're about our business. Who the hell do you think you are?!"

But Bartimaeus only shouts louder. "Son of David, have mercy on me!" He's got spiritual courage.

Jesus stops right in his tracks and says, "Call him here." And they call him over. And those who were previously shush-ers change their tune. "Take heart," they say. "Get up. Jesus is calling you."

So Bartimaeus gets up - No, the scripture says he "sprang up" to come to Jesus! Without regard, he throws off his cloak, his only protection from the elements. His only possession. His only thing to cling to in his pathetic life - and he stands before the Lord.

Jesus asks him, "What do you want me to do for you?" I'm not so sure he asks this compassionately. Jesus has been known to give in to peer pressure from time to time when his friends are being nasty.

And the blind beggar says to him, "My teacher, let me see again."

And Jesus comes to himself, and without hesitation says, "Go; your faith has made you well." And immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

He leaves even his cloak, the only comfort he had, and joins the way of Jesus.

There is a long tradition of interpreting scripture for our spiritual journeys by asking, "Who am I in this story and who is God calling me to become in this story?"

For many of us, if we're honest, we are the shush-ers. We are the disciples of Jesus who wish that everyone would just shut up and count their blessings. Life is too anxious to hear from everyone. Many of us, who are doing ok, or who are barely making it prefer the current status quo to - God forbid - something worse! We benefit from nothing changing. Many, not all of us. We would prefer people keep their problems and opinions to themselves and not destabilize, in any way, the carefully constructed house of cards we live in.

But friends, Jesus is quite clear. We are not invited to be like the disciples in this story. No. We are not invited to maintain a conspiracy of silence while our neighbors live in terror and grief.

Jesus invites us instead to have the courage of Bartimaeus. To cry out - to shout even! -- to God and each other, "Have mercy on me! Let me see again!"

I must confess to you my grave concern that vision, that sight, in so many of our communities, is failing. We don't see very well - and we are at risk of losing our sight altogether. The violence and terror visited upon our brothers and sisters by our own citizens threatens all of us. It seeks to drive a stake through the very heart of God. It seeks to obliterate community itself and leave everyone feeling alone.

Continuing evil acts, and the cultures that give rise to them must be repudiated in word and deed. We cannot stand idly by, not one of us.

To say this has been a terrible week in America would be an understatement.

Pipe bombs sent to political adversaries. A terrorist attack in the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh on the Sabbath. These are the most recent public horrors. It is too much for the human spirit to bear alone.

These continuing acts of violent hate seek to alienate us from each other. We cannot allow that.

This is why, even and especially in the midst of terror we must cry out, "Lord, have mercy!" God will not leave us comfortless. God will not leave us powerless. God will not leave us alone. No one is alone.

In the middle of this terrible week, I found myself at the Washington National Cathedral for a meeting.

The clergy and staff of the cathedral were preparing for the interment of Matthew Shepherd 20 years after his brutal murder.

A member of the cathedral clergy kindly led us to the place where Matthew's remains will rest. Just being in the serenity of that place for a moment caused healing and hope to well up inside me.

Matthew's parents held on to his ashes all these years out of concern for their potential desecration and out of respect for the families of others who might find his presence challenging. They had been so humble in their grief and so effective in their mission. They had waited for this moment and place.

By God's grace, Matthew rests now in a columbarium just across from Hellen Keller, who could not see or hear - and who had such vision, courage and hope for the human family. I can see them both springing up to God together, calling down mercy for us all.

The National Cathedral held a celebration of Matthew's life on Friday morning.

In his sermon, Bishop Robinson shared that the first policewoman to see Matthew as his broken body lay tied to a fence was surprised to find a deer laying peacefully beside him. As she approached, the deer looked right in her eyes before bounding up and running away. She experienced the deer as the presence of God. I think that deer prayed all night, "Lord, have mercy."

As our brothers and sisters were murdered at the Tree of Life yesterday in Squirrel Hill, I imagine a bird on every branch of that tree singing, "Lord, have mercy!"

Lord, have mercy. Those who rejected Bartimaeus, the terrorists who killed Matthew, and the terrorist who killed our brothers and sisters at the Tree of Life wanted them and all of us to feel broken and alone. But they did not succeed. They will never succeed.

For even in the darkest moments, God is always there. We are never alone. For blind Bartimaeus, every day was dark - but Jesus came his way and nothing could stop him from springing up, bounding toward the Lord demanding mercy.

Well, now Jesus has come our way, and we must spring up as well. And insist upon God's mercy for us and for all. Our lament must not go unheard; "God, Reclothe us in our rightful minds!"

Oh mercy, mercy me. We Christians must follow the way of Jesus with greater urgency in these days. By the grace of God, we must spring up. Bartimaeus shows us how.

We cannot stand idly by. For the night is dark, and it is so easy to lose the way.