

Bad Manners With Good Results

Twenty Third Sunday after Pentecost || October 27, 2024 || 9:30 am St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Hanover, MA || Proper 25B || Jeremiah 31:7-9; Psalm 126; Hebrews 7:23-28; Mark 10:46-52|| The Reverend Amy Whitcomb Slemmer, Esq.

This morning I'll confess to being a bit more foggy headed than I'd hoped. I traveled through a handful of time zones this weekend, and am very glad to be here – **home with you!** My trip was abbreviated, yet still very powerful. I went to Ghana to support Echoing Green's All Fellows Conference. We'll schedule a forum about my African travels sometime before the end of the year with photos and video.

For this morning's snippet, I will say that it was life changing. I visited a pair of castles that were built to facilitate the initiation of the slave trade, and I found them to be haunted with suffering and lost human potential. I also got to hang out with young entrepreneurs from all over the world, and their perspectives on some of our shared experiences greatly deepened my own and enhanced my education. Lots more to come.

I love that this morning's gospel is the healing of Bartimaeus, the Blind Begger, and that we are invited to think about where Jesus is in his earthly ministry.

Jericho is the last stop that Jesus makes before he enters Jerusalem for the last time. Jericho was not a big city situated about 15 miles northeast of Jerusalem. It was sometimes called the City of Palm Trees, and was an Oasis City. Herod, who will figure prominently in our scripture readings going forward, built his winter palace in Jericho because it was cool and had plentiful fresh water springs. It was a city for the rich and politically connected in their time. Beggars often lined up along this road hoping for charity from the Jericho residents.

Into this context comes Jesus and his followers, walking along this road, perhaps anticipating rest and refreshment. Instead there is a kerfuffle at the road side, when Bartimaeus, a blind beggar calls out to Jesus for help.

His outburst was outside the acceptable manners of the time. Bartimaeus broke the reverent silence and was immediately and roundly hushed! Imagine the bystanders being ashamed that a fellow beggar couldn't even maintain decorum for the brief interval when Jesus is walking by. We don't know how many times Bartimaeus called out to Jesus, but we can imagine that he did so with increasing urgency and volume, mortifying his fellow bystanders.

Jesus hears Bartimaeus and calls to him to come and as his dream has just come true, Bartimaeus sprints to Jesus' side. And our Savior says to this man - "[w]hat do you want me to do for you"? Jesus doesn't assume that Bartimaeus wants his sight restored, or that he wants to be made wealthy or to have all of his worries erased. Jesus asks "what do you want ME to do for YOU?"

How would you answer that question, and imagine how your prayer life might be enhanced or different if you responded to this very question? Jesus asks you – what do you want me to do for you?

I don't want to lose the thread of how Bartimaeus came to Jesus' attention and how he regained his sight. He shouted for mercy. He yelled at Jesus and his followers asking for help. He broke the social conventions, the polite norms to assert what he needed. His plea and request for Jesus was so important to him, that he was willing to risk being cast out further than his fellow beggars. He risked being shunned and shamed by articulating his needs.

I love this lesson. Social norms and conventions are aimed at control and maintaining the status quo. I spent lots of time over the last week trying to understand and mimic the manners and cultural norms expected of people in Ghana, so as not to inadvertently be disrespectful or insult a host. I learned to *never* reach or accept or hand anything to anyone using your left hand – always your right. When someone greets you with “Akwaaba!” you say, “me da wo ase”. I didn't want to create a ruckus or upset an apple cart, I wanted to learn and soak up as much culture, history and community as I could possibly squeeze in during my visit.

But our brother Bartimaeus is taking his turn, asserting himself, breaking the cultural expectations of silence. Because of his action, he changed his entire life's trajectory. He not only gained his sight, but he then followed Jesus into Jerusalem, on that long and dusty fifteen mile walk that would be the last for Jesus and his disciples.

So how might we know when to toe the line of polite conformity and when to step out of line and upend the apple cart? It is a conundrum, isn't it? I have several examples to point to of people shaking things up, usually on others' behalf. For those of you in the midst of complicated caregiving, think of Shirley MacLaine's big moment in *Terms of Endearment* when she screams at the medical staff that it is time for her daughter to have her pain medicine? Completely inappropriate and absolutely necessary at the same time. That scene brings chills and tears!

In Ghana I was moved by the new and shiny Echoing Green Fellows whose projects require upending social norms all over the world. Each project is based on the idea that the status quo is not sufficient – a group is teaching sustainable farming techniques to African farmers with the goal of increasing the farmers' lifespans and income from their current \$100 USD per annum to \$1,000 USD per annum. There is a young woman whose mission is to work with governments and cultural ministries to excavate mass graves, exhume and repatriate as many skeletal remains as possible and work to ensure that similar atrocities are never repeated. I was also surrounded by genius computer programmers – so many have spectacular apps! They are laser focused on expanding the languages and countries that can access some of our

best productivity software. A pair of fellows is advocating for ethical guidelines for AI and other computer technology breakthroughs that have the potential for unimaginable evil or social progress.

Each of these fellows is raising a stink and asserting that the status quo is not sufficient, that we can do better, and some are risking their lives for this work because their projects point out a status quo that embarrasses their national governments. But still they persist!

I was inspired by their determination and by the differences that they are already making with their projects. Just like Bartimaeus, these fellows are speaking up, ignoring social norms and working to improve the status quo.

Perhaps the unifying thread that invites stepping out of line is seeking a world or circumstance that is better aligned with the Kingdom of God and God's expectations that each of us will live into our full potential. Bartimaeus spoke out for healing for one of his senses, and the echoing green fellows are vigorously advocating for projects that will allow swaths of people to have access to resources that are necessary for human growth and development.

We know about Bartimaeus because he broke norms. In the midst of asserting what he needed of Jesus, we the surviving ancestors are given the **gift of insight** into a facet of Jesus' compassion. Jesus asks, "what would you have me do for you"? This is among our foundational stories in all of Christianity, and it exists because a faith-filled soul spoke out, stepped beyond the established social norms and said what he needed. The example of Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus, has survived across centuries, continents and languages to us this morning. We give thanks for Bartimaeus' faith, as we ponder what our response is to Jesus when he asks each of us, "What would you have me do for you?"

Amen+