

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

Mark 10:46-52

Jeremiah 31:7-9

Psalm 126

Hebrews 7:23-28

October 28, 2018

The Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost

I wish we could all be Bartimaeus. That we could all call out to God for the pain in our lives to be lifted. That we could all be healed from illness, trauma, or injury. I wish that every time we called out to Jesus to hear our desperate prayers that things would change.

Every time I read this next from Mark, I want to be joyful, I really do. I want to celebrate with Bartimaeus in his healing. I want to believe that every single one of us will receive that same gift – that we will all be able to jump up, feeling that life has been changed forever...for the good. But, I can't seem to do that.

I am not denying the power that this story holds for us. Because it is one of those pivotal stories in the Bible that gives us hope in the face of incredible adversity. It's the kind of story that keeps us coming back to our faith, to prayer, and to God...waiting for the day that we will be like Bartimaeus.

However, I know a different reality. In fact, we all do. We know that some will get the miracle that they pray for and others will not. Some will celebrate with tears of joy, while others will mourn with tears of deep anguish. And so every time I read this text, I imagine two people there that day. The one healed and another person somewhere in the crowd who did not get their own miracle. Not only do I see the joy in Bartimaeus' eyes as he sees the world for the first time. I see the pain and disappointment, the anger and the uncertainty in the eyes of the person left on the side of the road. The person who was not healed on that day in Jericho.

So, today, I want us to consider both the joy and the suffering that this story brings up for us. Because within this congregation I know that some of you have known the depth of wonder and joy and thankfulness that comes from having the miracle that you prayed so hard for granted. I also know that some of you have prayed desperately for a miracle and are still waiting for an answer. Or maybe you have come to terms with the fact that what you so longed for will not be granted.

You may hear this text from Mark and wonder...why not me?

How are we to make sense of it all? Many of you know that in my own family we have prayers that have gone unanswered for years as my boys continue to deal with their father's terminal cancer. I know they pray for his healing, for things to be different. I know they pray all the time for something better than that black cloud of fear that hangs over them. And they have a Mom who gets up every Sunday to preach about love and hope and healing and I know they wonder – hey mom...why not me? Why not this situation?

And so I want you to know that I have personally and deeply struggled with this dilemma of healing (or lack thereof) and how in the world do I make sense of it for my kids?

As I think of that answer for them and for all of you, here is what I have come to know...

The first thing is that Bartimaeus lived a very long with his blindness. Yes, he was healed but surely he prayed for days, weeks, maybe even years for healing to be granted to him. Healing wasn't just one miraculous moment. He waited...like many of you are waiting. And there is no sugar coating the pain and uncertainty that comes in those long spans of time when you keep praying day after day for an answer. But, when healing comes for us or for someone else, we are to rejoice and celebrate the new life that has been granted. To thank God for the miracle.

The second thing is that when we aren't granted healing after our span of waiting we have a choice. We have a choice to use our life for good. A choice to take our pain and transform it into a different kind of healing. We have a choice to be open to the movement of the Spirit in a way we might not have anticipated, to find meaning out of suffering.

Rabbi Harold Kushner described this meaning making out of suffering to be the greatest task of humanity. And it is our response to our situation that creates healing even in the deepest moments of suffering, when our prayers go unanswered, and when we are left wondering...why not me, Lord? Why not me?

Kushner wrote in his book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, that:

The conventional explanation, that God sends us the burden because [God] knows that we are strong enough to handle it, has it all wrong. Fate, not God, sends us the problem. When we try to deal with it, we find out that we are not strong. We are weak; we get tired, we get angry, overwhelmed. . . . But when we reach the limits of our own strength and courage, something unexpected happens. We find reinforcement coming from a source outside of ourselves. And in the knowledge that we are not alone, that God is on our side, we manage to go on. . . .

Like Jacob in the Bible], like every one of us at one time or another, you faced a scary situation, prayed for help, and found out that you were a lot stronger, and a lot better able to handle it, than you ever would have thought you were. In your desperation, you opened your heart in prayer, and what happened? You didn't get a miracle to avert a tragedy. But you discovered people around you, and God beside you, and strength within you to help you survive the tragedy. I offer that as an example of a prayer being answered.

Kushner is acknowledging that we all want have the same experience as Bartimaeus but we may not get it. However, we all have access to transformation, to gifts of the Spirit even in the midst of our suffering. There is always hope. There is always goodness. There is always mercy. But, it takes a willingness to see through tragedy and to recognize that God is there, in that moment, helping you find a way through.

Let me also say this...acknowledging the importance of turning suffering into transformation in no way seeks to diminish that reality of the pain you may be experiencing. It in no way is meant to overlook the loss you may have experienced, the grief you may be feeling, or the disillusionment with faith that you may be struggling with. Because if you are the person standing next to Bartimaeus and wondering, why not me, it is so important to call out that pain exactly for what it is.

This idea of making meaning out of suffering is not meant to ignore or trivialize the circumstances. If anything, it embraces the depth of your pain and says here is a way through, here is a way to healing.

The promise of the Gospel is that healing does happen. It may take a long time. We may wait in uncertainty. Some of us will get our miracle in time. Others of us will have to make sense of a different kind of miracle, something that arises out of the unjust and undeserved pain that is certain to come into our lives. Richard Rohr calls these sacred wounds...wounds that help us see a way through. Wounds that do indeed heal. The scars may remain but with God by our side, the scars become marks of transformation, not the reminders of defeat.

Amen.