

TAKE HEART, SEE AGAIN

Mark 10:46-52; Job 42

City Well United Methodist Church is a multicultural congregation in Durham, North Carolina. It has in its midst---now literally--- one that has been the concern of the church, a community member who is undocumented. Four years ago, Samuel Oliver-Bruno was granted a temporary work permit principally because his wife has debilitating Lupus and his son is a US citizen. A recent application for renewal of the permit was denied as was an appeal. Set to be deported, Oliver-Bruno came to City Well seeking help. The congregation offered him sanctuary and he now lives on the campus of the church.

We might raise the objection that a sanctuary is the place where we expect, where we hope to encounter God, *sanctus* being the Latin word for holy. For many, a sanctuary is a set-aside space reserved for worship, although such spaces have traditionally been used in other ways as well. The Renaissance would have been less vibrant were it not for the church which promoted art designed primarily to relate the stories of the Bible to the illiterate community. Stained glass windows were particularly able to represent not only the mystery of God perceived imperfectly in perhaps the design of a rose window, but also to teach about the heroes of faith as well as inspire the viewer with accounts of faith present even in the most mundane and ordinary activities of life: planting, waiting with lamps lighted for the bridegroom, being unexpectedly invited to a feast, an empty tomb. The windows of the sanctuary we enjoy lift up the work of the prophets and of the greatest of the prophets, Jesus, as his story is told by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

Not only have sanctuaries been repositories for the art of portrait, windows, statues, decorations, and even architecture, they were used to serve the community in its need. When rain showers threatened a market day, larger churches opened doors and welcomed the merchants and vendors---and the towns people---into its shelter where the very secular activity of selling and buying would take place. This holy place became the site of burial for some and a place of prayer for all. The moment in history when Thomas a Becket fled to the altar of the church for safety, there to be slain by the king's thugs, defined the sense of safety and even healing present within the walls of the church.

In our own time, sanctuaries are being used to store and distribute,

food, to shelter the homeless, and, as we hear, to provide a place of protection against the overwhelming power of civil government. Many would question the ‘holiness’ of such activity but we may be reminded that we are to care for “widow, the orphan, and the alien in the land”, perhaps at least with food, shelter, and safety for we, too, might find ourselves in such positions of need.

The state of these three categories of people in Israel often signified cursed people blessed by the people of God. Specifically lifting up these vulnerable cohorts reminds all that though we may consider the circumstances of others to be a result of uncontrollable situations and even desperate choices, faithful people are called to respond. And so, we learn of BarTimaeus, a blind beggar in Jericho, of a crowd familiar with him, and of Jesus who is making his way up to Jerusalem where he will be soon welcomed with tree branches and garments strewn in the road, and heralded with pleas of “Hosanna”.

According to Mark, this is the final miracle before that of resurrection, an event that will occur a few days later, after the prophecy of denial, crucifixion, and death comes to pass. Jericho remains a crossroads for Israel, an opportunity to make a way to the wilderness where one might hide and survive, to turn back and return to the relative safety of Galilee, or to move on up the City of Peace, Jerusalem. Jericho has been a settled society for probably thousands of years, or so the archaeologists would claim. It was likely the case that the community of Jericho knew much about the usual population of the town even as it recognized those who were merely passing through. The people knew of BarTimaeus and had become accustomed to his sitting by the roadside begging for coins to be thrown into his bowl. This blind man may have become so familiar to many that he and his need no longer impressed them, they were more focused upon this Jesus who was passing through their village.

Somehow, BarTimaeus heard that Jesus was passing by and he cried out for mercy. Perhaps not wishing to be embarrassed by the curse of blindness in their midst, they ordered him to be quiet. But somehow, the urge for healing was greater than the threat and the beggar continued to attract the attention of the man, this Son of David. When Jesus notices him and asks that he be brought forth, the townspeople change their response and tell the blindman to go to Jesus. The brief, largely unspecified encounter results not only in healing but also in a new disciple of this gentle rabbi.

Undoubtedly there were many healings at the hand and word of Jesus. Other gospels include accounts not found in Mark and thus we can conclude that each writer carefully chose the events that we be included in his gospel, primarily as opportunities to teach about faith.

In the Jericho story, we encounter several elements of growing faith. First, God is the source of mercy, as the cries of BarTimaueus indicate. There is no sense that the blind man is deserving of any consideration and even the crowd lining the roadside would wish him to be silent. But he understands the nature of the Son of David perhaps more fully than others and continues to seek Jesus. Mercy is always an expression of the gracious love of God though it might be a challenge for the human community. As God is merciful, we are called to offer mercy to all. Setting aside a judgment of curse and blessing, we are urged to consider and care. Such a change in perspective will not only pave the way to healing for others, it will make us more whole and holy.

John Wesley preached sanctification by grace even as he demanded that the Methodists enter the community to offer food to the hungry, care to the sick, concern for the imprisoned, learning for the poor. Wesley understood that he could do nothing less if he was to grow in his love for God and neighbor and he instructed his listeners to go and do likewise. Mercy is to be a way of life for those who follow Christ.

Such love will find its way to acts of encouraging others even as the townspeople urged the blind beggar to “take heart” and go to Jesus. Such a translation may miss the central element of looking to the heart for courage and confidence. Our sense of the presence of and need for mercy may cause us to encourage others in their healing. Perhaps it is the offering of Sunday lunch or a Thursday sack of food. It could also be a visit to those confined to a hospital or suffering alone in his or her home. It might even be standing with another who is attempting to make a way through systems that seem overburdening with policies and procedures that sometimes defy understanding. It may demand that we take responsibility for organizing a society that is based upon reconciliation and peace. Gospel is offered through encouraging those in need of mercy, first, to give them confidence that such mercy is available.

Opportunities for mercy offer themselves within the lives we lead as sanctuary---the holy presence of God---floods through the world. It is this mercy that will encourage and then invite another to be healed. It may begin with the simple acknowledgement of another person through a kind word. It will continue as we listen to the story of the other’s life. It will find its full

blessing of peace in our responses of love and grace and reconciling justice.

Again, we hear of hatred's deadly work in our world. Ironically, The Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh has become a place of death. While celebrating a child's entrance into the life of a congregation of faith, one came to kill. It is not enough to only offer our "thoughts and prayers" to the people of the Jewish community, we might even join in a vigil of mourning as is the tradition of Judaism. But are we not called to act to overwhelm evil with good, intolerance with righteousness and justice? Once again, we must raise the question of not only the sources of such hate but also the tools that are readily available to express such hate with killing. Though such weapons are numerous, guns, particularly of the assault type, give easy access to such expressions. How long will we tolerate such access?

Let us stand with Rabbi Rick Schechter who has graced this church with his presence and witness and with his people who continue to endure and serve in the face of threat. Let us also hear of the appreciation for those who stand with others to offer courage and hope. Rabbi Simcha Backman writes in response to the events at the Tree of Life synagogue:

"On a personal note, although barbaric incidents like these and the indescribable tragedy are extremely distressing I feel blessed to call this country home and live amongst neighbors and friends such as yourselves. I was raised in a household of Holocaust survivors and was acutely aware of the indifference of entire European populations towards the persecution of fellow Jewish citizens. In stark contrast, the outpouring of love and support from the entirety of the US population and government officials towards our people at this painful time illustrates our ability to rise above bigotry and hate and embrace each other as fellow human beings and as fellow Americans united to defeat intolerance."

As Rabbi Schechter reminds us, we are called to *tikkun 'olam* to "heal the world". The people of Jericho may have much to teach us about fulfilling such a call. The healing of the world will feature respect for all people, considering every person to be of worth and value while standing with these others as they seek new sight for any blinded by fear and threat and even tradition. As is the case of the blind beggar in Jericho, such courageous respect with cause all to see again and perhaps to follow in the liberating way of Christ, this one who chooses Jerusalem, fully aware of the possibility. Well beyond the widow, the orphan, the alien in the land, there are others who seek sanctuary in life. Their hope is to encounter the holy so that healing may take place. It is we who are called to both promise and ready them that as they take heart, they will see again. And in doing so, we shall find the courage to take heart and see anew. Thanks be to God. Amen.