

**Proper 25B
Mark 10:46-52
October 25, 2009**

“Atheism is a first world luxury.” My son Andrew said that to me after our second trip to Haiti last spring. In Haiti, you see, everyone believes in God. God is everywhere. Painted on storefronts, written as graffiti, decorating the sides of the multi-colored buses, the tap-taps, are a multitude of appeals ... “Jesus have mercy.” “God defend us.” “Lord Jesus is my assurance.” “Bless the Lord everybody.”

In Haiti everyone believes in God. Despite all evidence to the contrary. Even when there’s not enough food to eat. Even when there’s not enough money to pay for a child’s schooling. Even when hurricanes come and wash away farms and animals and houses. Even when people die of perfectly preventable diseases. Even when the only thing you can afford to buy in the market is a dirt cookie.

In Haiti, people believe in God because they know, down to the core of their being, that they can’t do it all themselves. They know that no matter how hard they work, it only takes a storm, or an illness, or a violent upheaval to wipe it all away. They believe in God because God is all they have to rely upon. They believe in God because they know that, in the end, when everything and everyone fails them, God will not. They know that God will stand for them. That God will walk with them. That God will give them comfort. That God will give them hope.

Here, in America, here in East Lansing ... not so much. By a simple accident of birth most of us were born here, in the richest nation in the world, where we were provided with a public education, given ready access to inoculations and medications, and fed with a bounty of food, much of which is neither good for us nor necessary for our well-being.

We have good Midwestern values. We work hard, pay our taxes, get good grades, obey the laws, try to be good citizens. And we are imbued with the ultimate American ethos, the conviction that if we do all these things, then we can be anything we want to be. We can live the American dream and succeed in our chosen professions. We can pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. We can be independent, self-reliant. We shouldn't have to ask anyone else for help or make anyone else go out of their way.

Even God.

And so, too often, our prayer lives end up something like this. "Hello, God. Yes, it's me. Just wanted you to know I'm still OK down here. Don't want to bother you too much. You have plenty of bigger problems in the world than mine. So I hope you take care of them, and don't worry about me ... I'll just keep on keeping on. OK. Bye now. Amen."

If we pray at all. And because we are unsure how to relate to an Almighty God when we seem to be doing just fine on our own, being a good person, living a good life, the accidental and also the hard-earned securities of our lives can lead us into thinking that not only do we not need to Bother God, we also don't really need to Bother WITH God. We are free to pick and choose whether or not to be in touch with God, to believe in God, because most of the time, we are completely and totally blind to our desperate need of God.

And speaking of being blind ... how about that gospel lesson today?

As Jesus was leaving Jericho that day, his last stop before he entered Jerusalem -- for the first and also the last time ever -- he passed by a man sitting by the side of the road. A blind beggar, Bartimaeus, the son of Timaeus. "Son of David, have mercy on me!" this poor blind beggar yelled.

And everyone around him tried to shush him up. Don't bother the Teacher. Be quiet. Your problems aren't his business. He has more important things to worry about than you.

But Bartimaeus didn't believe that. He believed that Jesus would care about his problems, would care that he was blind, would care that he was unable to work and earn a living. So he shouted all the louder, "Son of David! Have mercy on me!"

As blind as he was, Bartimaeus could see what the others could not. Where they saw Jesus of Nazareth, Bartimaeus perceived the Son of David. Where they saw a busy teacher too important to be bothered, Bartimaeus understood that his hope, his life, and his last, best chance was coming into view.

Jesus called him over and asked, "What do you want me to do for you?"

Now, if you are a serious reader of Mark's gospel, or if you were paying attention when the gospel was read in church two weeks ago, you may remember that Jesus has already recently asked someone this same question. He asked it of his friends James and John when they came up to him and said, "Teacher, we want you do for us whatever we ask of you." "What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus said.

And James and John, who had been with Jesus from the beginning of his ministry, who had paid their dues, earned their stripes, worked their way up the discipleship ladder, asked him for the promotion they believed they had earned. "We want to sit at your right and left hand when you enter into your glory," they announced.

But what they thought they earned, or deserved, by being good disciples, by doing all the right things ... they did not get.

And yet, what Bartimaeus knew he did not earn or deserve, what he could only beg for, plead for, shout and holler for ... he got. Jesus restored his sight and Bartimaeus followed him on the way ... out of Jericho and right into Jerusalem.

Bartimaeus, in his weakness, in his dependence, in his desperate need, proves to be a better model for faithful discipleship than James and John do. Because we all need God. All the time. In good times, yes, but especially in bad times.

But too often we are blind to our need of God and our dependence upon God. Like James and John, we approach Jesus with a sense of entitlement ... I'm a good person, so why is this bad thing happening to me? I work hard, so why am I the one getting laid off? Why does everyone else seem to find somebody to love and I'm still out here, single and flailing?

So instead of yelling and hollering, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" instead of acknowledging our helplessness over the chaotic and unpredictable forces of our lives, we back off and stiffen up and turn away. Some of us even lose our faith.

You know, lack of faith is not really a question of belief. Belief is a head thing, a thinking thing, like do we think everything in the Creed is true. Lack of faith is not a question of belief. It is a question of trust. Can God be trusted?

Can God be trusted? Well not if you expect God to be like Superman and save the day, or to be like a gumball machine and spit out the right solution if we drop the right prayer in the slot, or to be some kind of puppet master who willfully makes things happen, good or bad, according to some pre-determined plan. Not if you expect God to work out of our ideas of control, and power, and autonomy.

But if you know that no matter what you do, that life will continue to unfold in random and unpredictable ways. If you know that this comforting bubble we call American life in the 21st century is just that ... a bubble. If you know that you will be pushed to the wall at least once in your life and probably more often than that, then perhaps you are willing to take a chance on God.

I don't know how many of you have ever been to an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, or the meeting of any other 12 step group. A number of these groups meet here at All Saints, and I wish we had more, because not only do they literally save jobs, save marriages, save families, save people's very lives ... they do it out of this same understanding. Not the way not of James and John, but the way of Bartimaeus. The way that doesn't expect God to fix it all, but the way that trusts that ONLY God can fix any of it.

Every one of these groups begins with a single step. Step one. “We admitted we were powerless” -- over an addiction, or over the family member or friend with the addiction. The key is in understanding that fundamentally, one is powerless. Powerless.

Step two. “We came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.”

Step three. “We made a decision to turn our lives over to the care of God as we understood God.”

And that’s how it begins for those on the road to sobriety and sanity. With that heartfelt cry, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” And as any one who has been sober, clean and sane for any amount of time will tell you, God does not fail. God and the community brought together around those 12 steps never lets them down. God opens their eyes, heals their affliction and leads them on the pathway of life.

If we could discover in ourselves what Bartimaeus knew, what the people of Haiti know, what the participants in 12-step programs know, what anyone who has ever cast a last desperate hope upon God knows, we would never be afraid to pray.

We would know that even if the specifics of those prayers are not answered, that God delights when we ask, and then ... God gives us what we need. Strength, courage, joy, life, perseverance, delight, endurance, insight, wisdom, blessings and love ... oh, more love than you could ever imagine.

God never fails. Never falters. Never, ever, ever lets us go. We need only to let go ourselves to learn this simple truth.