

October 28, 2012

The 22nd Sunday after Pentecost

Jeremiah 31:7-9; Mark 10:46-52

All Saints', Atlanta, Georgia

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Open Your Eyes

God's promise to a people in exile is *restoration*. The great procession home from foreign lands will include the blind and the lame and the procession will be led with consolations by God. This sounds wonderful, but we know some things about human nature that suggest that we frequently find salvation less compelling in practice than we do in theory. Historians, archeologists and anthropologists tell us that remarkably few people actually made the journey home once their captors' power came to an end.

Leading citizens had been taken into captivity, encouraged to intermarry with the locals, raise children and get on with their lives in their new land. When the dream of the psalmist and prophets of blessed return, renewal and restoration became a real possibility, there were plenty of exiles who found that they preferred to stay where they were rather than start over in a restored Zion. They went for the devil they knew rather than the hope of a new and renewed world. So we face the common spiritual question as to why, so often when we are presented with hope, real newness of life, real restoration, do we so often fail to grasp the gift that is before us? Why do we turn our backs on grace? How does our sense of urgency for a better world for everyone get dulled?

This is not exactly the kind of thing that happens someone offers you tickets to something wonderful, something you know you will enjoy, and you decline them because you are just too tired or you don't want to get dressed up or you had in mind something else like a television show. That is not exactly turning your back on grace, but it is a cousin.

For me and for many of us the mechanisms that conspire to keep us from doing whatever it is we need to do that will restore us to that fundamental sense of being at home—at home in Eden, at home in our own skin, in a place without anxiety or fear, a place of intrinsic meaning—those mechanisms include things like being too busy to take on something else at the moment, even if that something else might be the key to everything else. I've talked to many people who don't have time for therapy, even though organizing their lives around therapy for a season is exactly what is needed. The same goes for our prayer life or exercise regimen. When we make time to exercise, our whole life gets better. We sleep better, our attitude is better, we quite literally *feel* better. You know how it works; we have to turn toward grace in order to be able to receive it.

A more profound challenge to our embracing the good news of salvation like those in exile who declined to return to Israel, is that over time we have settled for good enough. Outwardly and visibly things are fine, but we find ourselves in a season where we have lost our spark, our potency, our passion for life. Nothing is really wrong, but we need

some task, some direction, some challenge or some work that will call us back toward what matters. This, incidentally, is why a capital campaign such as we will be undertaking after Christmas can be a great time of spiritual renewal in a community of faith. Even so, when the call to return from exile is less about reorganizing life around some saving habit or practice, and more demanding the kind of shift that happens when we consider a new position, or moving from a city we love, or being downwardly mobile. It is the same with even higher callings like making a lifelong commitment to a partner or choosing to raise a child--*those* are the kinds of call that can be hard to hear.

St. Paul knew all about this and wrote about it as he thought about the law in *Romans*. "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want but I do the very thing I hate" (7:15). He calls this sin which somehow dwells in him. Sin is not something entirely subject to our control and decision, but it is up to us how we will address it. Sin is not so much about breaking the rules, and is more about acting without integrity. The consequence of sin is not punishment as such, but it is a kind of dislocation, a kind of exile from that place of being entirely comfortable in our own skin. Sin and its consequence cry out for restoration. It is just that sometimes the pain has to be great enough to make us really want something different for ourselves and those we love; or our hope has to be something other than that to which we pay lip service and instead be something to which we will have to respond when change is presented to us. Salvation is our choosing the way of integrity, freedom from anxiety, risk and adventure, holiness or wholeness of life. Getting there usually means letting go of something that we think is really important to us, something we imagine we do not want to forgo. At the very least, salvation will require a hard-won change in our habits.

And so consider Bartimaeus. We don't have to believe as did many in Jesus' day that his blindness was a direct consequence of someone's sin --his or his parents-- in order to grasp that he is being confronted with that same spiritual question that we all face in many and varied ways: Do you want a free and full and rich life? Do you want abundant and eternal life? Can you imagine living in absolute integrity? Bartimaeus is sitting by the side of the road on the outskirts of Jericho, presumably doing what he knows best which is pan-handling. He hears a crowd going by, learns that it includes Jesus of Nazareth, who by now had a bit of a reputation, and shouts out "Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me." I expect this was not unlike saying "Could you help me get something to eat?" Or "I need a bus ticket to get to the shelter." He won't be shushed and is not going to let this opportunity for something -- who knows what?-- a little change perhaps?-- something anyway-- he is not going to let this opportunity pass him by. Jesus calls him over and then asks one of the most chilling questions of the gospel: "What do you want me to do for you?" "What do you want *really*?" Jesus is asking whether Bartimaeus is serious. Does he just want a few coins, something that will get him through another not-too-bad day, or does he want salvation? Does he want something that will mean anything but what is not working now? Does he want real life which will require real change? In a way Jesus already knows the answer because when Bartimaeus stood up he had thrown off his cloak which was part of his beggar's uniform. Bartimaeus did not have to 'hit bottom' or maybe he was already living at the bottom, but he went for the radically new, the one thing from which there was no turning back: "my teacher, let me see *again*." "Rabbi, *restore* my sight. Bring me home from my exile.

Lead me in the way that is the way of abundant life." This is no appeal for cheap grace. This is a man choosing to reach for the things that he really wants in life. No more excuses. No more accepting his dreadful lot in life. No more whining. (It's so *hard*.) Instead he chooses newness of life, the wonder of seeing the world anew, the challenge of making a living in some new way, a reaching for integrity and wholeness of life.

Brothers and sisters, each of us knows what we have to do as we continue our response to the gospel. I don't know precisely what it is for you, but I do know that it is not completely easy and probably not straightforward. But it is important that we not forgo the good in favor of the 'good enough'. It is important that we stay alive to grace.

In conversation with parents and godparents yesterday we thought about what it means to help these children and each other see things truly in the community of faith. Part of that seeing is remembering what is truly important in life and how that includes paying attention to the little things along the way if we wish to grasp the big moment and pray with Bartimaeus "Rabbi, restore my sight."