

“On the Way”
A Sermon by the Rev. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian – New Canaan, October 24, 2021

Please Read:
Hebrews 7:23–28
Mark 10:46–52

Today, we are honoring Tina St. Armand, who has served faithfully for the past 33 plus years as our church secretary, but if you know Tina, she has offered much more than efficient administrative support. She has had a unique *ministry* here for the past 33 years. It depends on how you see things. I’ve only been here 14 months, but long enough to know that Tina has blessed many people over the years. And as you retire, we want you to know, Tina, that we see you as much more than a secretary. You have been a friend and colleague, and indeed, a minister to many over your tenure here. And one of the gifts that you have brought to the ministry is your attention to details. You’ve heard it said that the Devil is in the details. Actually, God is in the details!

Our gospel text includes details important for us to note. Jesus and his disciples, Mark writes, and “a large crowd” were leaving Jericho. Jericho, interestingly, is one of the oldest continually lived in cities of the world. Perhaps here is a reference to tradition? Note also that Jesus is heading away from there to Jerusalem, where he will face his final confrontation with the religious and political authorities and be arrested and crucified. Here is the last teaching in Mark about discipleship, and the turn toward Jerusalem and the Passion of Christ. But sitting by the roadside is a blind beggar called Bartimaeus. The fact that he is given a name is important. Did you know that this is the only time in the Synoptic gospels that a name is given for a person miraculously healed by Jesus?

Mark seems to be enjoying a little word play here, as the name is interestingly ambiguous. Not only is this the first time a name is given, but the name is given twice! The Aramaic derivation meaning son of "Bar-teymah" means "son of poverty," or "son of the unclean."¹ But in the Greek, it means something like: “son of the precious or worthy one.”² Perhaps Mark is hinting at the implication of Christ’s transforming ministry, bringing people from uncleanness to righteousness, from spiritual poverty to riches, from outsider to insider, from shame to worth!

This story is, ironically, about seeing. Throughout Mark’s gospel, the disciples do not see who Jesus is. And while no disciples are named, Mark lets us know that as Bartimaeus cried out the prayer of faith, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” the disciples strangely tried to silence him: “Many sternly ordered him to be quiet.” Blind Bartimaeus sees who Jesus really is and knows what Jesus offers!

Then there is this stunning moment in the story as the crowd is moving along the road and this man shouting and others trying to control him, and “Jesus stood still...” Jesus is always in the middle of our busy and hurried lives, in the midst of our futile attempts to control and manage the chaos. In the center of it all Jesus stands still... *But while still, Jesus is still in charge!* He calls Bart to come, and now the disciples call out, “Take heart, he is calling you!”

This story is also about seeing opportunity. Bartimaeus throws off his cloak and jumps up to Jesus. This is also a detail that is oftentimes overlooked, but critical to this story. The cloak is likely the only thing of worth that Bartimaeus, a beggar, has. Contrast this with the story of the rich man

¹ <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/MkPentecost22.html>, referenced October 8, 2012.

² <http://www.michaelturton.com/Mark/GMark10.html#10.p.46.52>, referenced October 8, 2012.

who is invited to sell all he has to come follow Jesus, but goes away sad because he can't let it go. Bartimaeus, as Jesus calls him, immediately let's go of his only possession to come and follow Jesus. It's as though Bartimaeus sees to the heart of Jesus, and knows that this is the best invitation he will ever have. He hears Jesus' voice, and he comes.

Jesus asks him, "What do you want me to do for you?" This question is a reminder of the absolute freedom that we are given as we interact with the living God. Salvation does not involve forceful intrusion. There is no overpowering domination. Jesus doesn't require slavish homage. Rather, even of this roadside beggar, he asks, "What do you want me to do for you?" I guess Bartimaeus is also moved by Jesus' show of love. And when Jesus asks him the question, Bart has a ready answer for him: "My teacher, let me see again."

This brings me back to Tina. Over the years, in any kind of Christian ministry, it is tempting to not see people for who they really are, but compassionate ministry takes practice and reading between the lines or seeing with the heart. It also involves asking, "What do you want me to do for you?" I'm sure Tina has asked that questions thousands of times. The Rev. Ann Hallstein³ wrote a chapter on Tina in her book *Everyday Healing*, and describes Tina as a person who sees with the eyes of compassion and care. She notices the details, the dates, the places, the names, the anniversaries, the birthdays... It's a gift that some of us do not have, but Tina has this gift to see and pay attention to what is needed...

When's the last time you've reflected on your need before God? Perhaps like Bart, you know your need, and can name it. I think this is a difficult question. I have a vague list of needed improvements in my life, but I know Bart's prayer well: "Have mercy on me!" Where do you need mercy in your life? Where do you need release from guilt, from anxiety, from the burdens you are carrying? In the end, we all need to cry out to Jesus, "Have mercy on me!" Our broken dreams, our failed lives, our petty sins and idols that we have settled for all seem so pointless when we come face to face with Jesus. What a gift it is to have the clarity of spiritual sight that Bartimaeus has, to be able to say, "This is what I need!" Jesus is standing still in the midst of our chaos, our confusion, and hears our cry for mercy ...

In response to Bart's confession, Jesus commends him for his faith. This is in subtle contrast to the disciples' continuous lack of faith, or at least misguided faith. As opposed to the faith that wanted to protect Jesus from the outcast, that wanted to silence the desperate cry for mercy, Jesus commends the raw assertiveness of Bartimaeus. And of course, Bartimaeus is healed of his blindness. But perhaps the deeper healing is that Bart is no longer left along the roadside. Notice that he joins the parade. He moves from a blind beggar by the road, to a faithful disciple *on the road* following Jesus. Here is the dynamic of salvation in Christ ... Found by the roadside in desperate need, we call out to Christ, only to realize that we are called by Christ, our sight is restored, and we join on the way of following Jesus.

³ Ann Hallstein, *Everyday Healing: Finding Extraordinary Moments in Ordinary Times* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1999).

Perhaps you saw in the NYT yesterday the article on Helen Keller by Leona Godin⁴, or saw the PBS premier on Tuesday, “Becoming Helen Keller.” We are reminded that one of the more famous people with blindness saw deeply into the needs for justice and social change in our country. She worked hard to communicate with all kinds of people and fought for the rights of others, for acceptance and inclusion. She was a socialist, a suffragist and founding member of the American Civil Liberties Union.

But did you know how Helen Keller, became, well, Helen Keller? It all goes back to a support worker. Dr. Frank Mayfield was touring Tewksbury Institute when, on his way out, he accidentally collided with an elderly floor maid. To cover the awkward moment he asked her, "How long have you worked here?"

"I've worked here almost since the place opened," the maid replied. "What can you tell me about the history of this place?" the doctor asked. "I don't think I can tell you anything, but I could show you something."

With that, she led him down to the basement under the oldest section of the building. She pointed to what looked like a small prison cell, and said, "That's the cage where they used to keep Annie Sullivan." "Who's Annie?" the doctor asked. "Annie was a young girl who was brought in here because she was incorrigible—nobody could do anything with her. She'd bite and scream and throw her food. The doctors and nurses couldn't even examine her or anything. She would spit and scratch at them.

"I was only a few years younger than her myself and used to think, 'I would hate to be locked up in a cage like that.' I wanted to help her, but didn't have any idea what I could do. If the doctors and nurses couldn't help her, what could I do?"

"I didn't know what else to do, so I just baked her some brownies one night after work. The next day I went to her cage and said, 'Annie, I baked these brownies for you. I'll put them here on the floor and you can eat them if you want.' "Then I got out of there as fast as I could because I was afraid she might throw them at me. But she didn't. She took the brownies and ate them.

After that, she was a little bit nicer to me when I was around. Sometimes I'd talk to her. Once, I even got her laughing. One of the nurses noticed and told the doctor. They asked if I'd help them with Annie. I said I would. So every time they wanted to see Annie, I went into the cage first and explained and calmed her down and held her hand. This is how we discovered that Annie was almost totally blind."

After they'd been working with her for about a year...the Perkins Institute for the Blind opened. They were able to help Annie and she went on to study and became a teacher herself. Annie came back to the Tewksbury Institute to visit, and to see what she could do to help out.

⁴ M. Leona Godin, “Helen Keller and the Problem of ‘Inspiration Porn’ (*New York Times*, Sat., Oct. 23, 2021), A23.

At first, the Director didn't say anything and then he thought about a letter he'd just received. A man had written to him about his daughter. She was absolutely unruly—almost like an animal. She was blind and deaf as well as 'deranged.'

He was at wit's end, but didn't want to put her in an asylum. So, he wrote the Institute to ask if they knew anyone who would come and work with his daughter.

And that is how Annie Sullivan became the lifelong companion of Helen Keller.

When Helen Keller received the Nobel Prize, she was asked who had the greatest impact on her life and she said, "Annie Sullivan." But Annie said, "No Helen. The woman who had the greatest influence on both our lives was a floor maid at the Tewksbury Institute."

You see, you never know who you're going to meet on the way, and you never know what impact your noticing little things, and opportunities to show God's love and kindness may have on the lives of others. Our job is to cry out for mercy, and to look for ways to show mercy to others. That's what Tina has been doing faithfully for 33 years here at the First Presbyterian Church in New Canaan. Who knows how many lives she has touched with God's mercy and love ...?

We will miss you, Tina, but glad that you are moving on to enjoy a well-deserved retirement in North Carolina. I hope that on the way, and through the rest of your years, you will continue to see with that same eye of compassion and love and touch others with God's mercy and grace. You're an example to us all, both in seeing, and in paying attention to the details, the little ways that can make a difference, even change the world. For you, Tina, and for your example of seeing from the heart, and being *on the way* with us for these 33 years, thanks be to God!

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen!