

30th Sunday in Ordinary Time
October 25, 2009
COLLEGE CHURCH – SAINT LOUIS
BARTIMAEUS AND HEALTH CARE REFORM

Gospel
[Mk 10:46-52](#)

As Jesus was leaving Jericho with his disciples and a sizable crowd,
Bartimaeus, a blind man, the son of Timaeus,
sat by the roadside begging.
On hearing that it was Jesus of Nazareth,
he began to cry out and say,
"Jesus, son of David, have pity on me."
And many rebuked him, telling him to be silent.
But he kept calling out all the more,
"Son of David, have pity on me."
Jesus stopped and said, "Call him."
So they called the blind man, saying to him,
"Take courage; get up, Jesus is calling you."
He threw aside his cloak, sprang up, and came to Jesus.
Jesus said to him in reply, "What do you want me to do for you?"
The blind man replied to him, "Master, I want to see."
Jesus told him, "Go your way; your faith has saved you."
Immediately he received his sight
and followed him on the way.

A preacher has to do two things. First, he has to understand the scriptural message he is preaching on. And second, he has to relate it to his own cultural setting – the time, place and problems that face his congregation.

I'd do a little bit of adaptation of today's story by asking you to imagine first of all that there was some dialogue between Bartimaeus and Jesus that Mark did not record. Also, imagine that it takes place not in 1st century Jericho, but here in St. Louis, in the 21st century, perhaps right down the street.

When Jesus called Bartimaeus over, he asked him first to tell him a little about his problem. "Have you always been blind," Jesus asked, perhaps thinking about the man born blind in the Gospel of John.

"No, I always had bad eyesight, but it was getting worse."

"Have you seen a doctor? I noticed there are some very good hospitals in the neighborhood and I imagine there are a few top-notch ophthalmologists around."

"Well, yes, I did go see an eye doctor," Bartimaeus replied. "He said I needed some minor surgery, but would have to put drops in my eyes for two weeks first".

“So I did that, or at least I tried to do it, but I couldn’t read the instructions very well and I didn’t have anyone to put the drops in for me; and then I missed my follow-up appointment because I got on the wrong bus.”

When I finally got back to the doctor two weeks later, the doctor seemed upset. He said not only did I miss my appointment, but I had only used half the drops. I tried to explain about the bus and that I couldn’t see how much I was putting in my eye, but the doctor said he had another patient to see. “Mr. Bartimaeus, if you won’t take any responsibility for your own health, I can’t help you.”

“Then on top of all that, I lost my job and my insurance. So I haven’t been back to the doctor since.”

Jesus heaved a sigh of relief. “You said you had a job with insurance? Well, then things are looking up! Don’t you have this thing called COBRA which will allow you to keep your insurance even if you lose your job?”

“Yeah, right,” Bartimaeus said. “You can keep it IF you can pay for it. But I can’t even pay for a place to live. How can I afford health insurance?”

Jesus thought to himself, well, I don’t usually like to work outside the system, but clearly the system is not working for Bartimaeus. I may have to take matters into my own hands.

“What do you want me to do for you,” he said? “I want to see,” said Bartimaeus. And he laid hands on Bartimaeus and restored his sight.

Obviously, I’ve taken this story and turned it into a parable about health care reform in a time and place very different from Jericho. I did this because we have to think about the demands of the Gospel in our own circumstances.

As we struggle through this process of health care reform there are many objections, but many of them have to do with cost and with the fear that someone is going to get something for nothing. But I think there are three very powerful reasons why we have to change the system.

Basic human dignity. Bartimaeus was desperate, he wasn’t ashamed to cry out, “Have pity on me.” He had no where else to turn. There are many other desperate people out there, people who, because of age, infirmity or economic circumstances cannot access basic health care. It is a scandal that in a country as rich as ours, with the health care resources we have, that so many lack basic care and a medical home.

The Second is that health care not just a product, but part of the **common good**. It is what makes our life together possible. We often view health care as though it is just another commodity - like a widescreen TV or a new car or a second home, things that I buy if I have the money. Health care is unlike any of these things. It a service that touches us at the core of who we are. If we accept the principle of solidarity – which means that the relationships among us are real and that we are all in the human condition together, then we

have to work for more equitable access to health care. It is in nobody's interest to have people suffering from treatable illness. When one of us is sick, all of us are sick.

Finally, health care reform is essential because in addition to being a human service, it is also a **sacrament**. Jesus healed the man's physical blindness, but that healing was clearly a symbol of a deeper healing. The story tells us that when his sight was restored, the man gave thanks and followed Jesus. Health care providers know that often when they complete their work, something else happens. It is not just about medical effects but about emotional and spiritual effects. For many people, illness and healing are among the most profound experiences we can have. They reveal God to us in ways that few other things do.

In a moment we are going to celebrate the anointing of the sick, asking God's healing power on those who have a variety of health problems. But even as we ask God's healing power, we have to be willing to cooperate, to do our part. God doesn't usually work alone – he needs our help, especially in the struggle for justice.

As we do that, I ask you to **think of what else we can do** to bring healing touch to those who suffer. We may differ on which bill is best, but as good citizens and as Christians, none of us can sit here and think the status quo is acceptable. As we anoint our brothers and sisters, let us also accept our responsibility to see that our vast health care resources become more widely available so that others can experience not only physical healing, but the power of God's grace.

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