

“Positioned for a Divine Encounter”

Mark 10:46-52

Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost: November 14, 2010 – Dedication of Paraments

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At one time Bartimaeus was able to see, but when we encounter him in Mark’s gospel, he is blind. Bartimaeus is smart and knows his way around a dark world. He positions himself in a prominent place on a prominent road. He sits there on the side of that prominent road clutching his cloak. This, you see, is his comfort. It is his warmth; it is his security. By day, he spreads his cloak out in his lap to catch the coins that are tossed his way and by night that same cloak is his blanket. Like little Linus in the *Peanuts* cartoons, Bartimaeus clings to his cloak, his security blanket. The world around Bartimaeus passes him by; people come and go in the busyness of their lives. And he is left sitting there, by the side of the road, powerless, sightless.

But one day Bartimaeus hears that Jesus of Nazareth is setting out for a journey along that prominent road from Jericho to Jerusalem. When he knew Jesus was near, he cried “Mercy!” Some of those who were with Jesus saw him as a nuisance ...a beggar. They were quick to remind Bartimaeus that he didn’t merit any notice, that he didn’t belong in their group, that he needed to be silent. But Bartimaeus, seeing with the eyes of God’s Spirit, called out again to Jesus: “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”

And then the most wonderful and surprising thing happened. The surprise is not that Jesus stops in his tracks, or that Jesus hears Bartimaeus’ cries, or that Jesus calls the blind man to himself. No, the surprise - the miracle - is that Bartimaeus throws off his cloak and springs up. In that moment, Bartimaeus sheds all the security and comfort and familiarity of his old way of life. He throws off the cloak of an identity and reality that kept him quiet, that left him feeling resentful and powerless, an identity that was deeply ingrained in his very being.

When Jesus asks just what it is that Bartimaeus wants, he does not ask for a lifetime supply of blankets; he doesn’t ask for a way to continue in the life of blindness that he is living. Instead, Bartimaeus presents himself with the strange and faith-filled expectation that he can be changed ...that he can become someone entirely new. Bartimaeus’ faith in Jesus gives him the power to reclaim his life, to stand up and to speak out, to regain the vision that he had lost.

From this position of faith-filled power, Bartimaeus joins Jesus, following the Messiah on the way to Jerusalem ...on the way to the cross.

This story is a story of being positioned for new beginnings ...new beginnings that are possible when we position ourselves to have a divine encounter ...an encounter with Jesus in whom we put our trust. This is the story of Christian faith. New beginnings are really what Christian faith is all about.

I don't know about you, but I found a few things in this story that seem to speak to us here at MUMC. Let me lift up a few. Like Bartimaeus, we at Memorial are positioned on the side of a prominent road – Highway 109 or Randolph Street. I wonder what people think as they pass us by. We're hard to miss - or are we? What do people think of when they see Memorial United Methodist Church? I don't know the answer to this question. It's a question we would do well to ask ourselves and to ask others.

Like Bartimaeus, we at Memorial have a vision. We are reminded during our annual stewardship campaign of those who have gone before us to provide for this church ...the people who built this church ...the people who have left us with a great heritage which includes their vision of what this church could be. Surely they had a vision of the power of God flowing like a river from the baptismal font ...a vision of the power of God shining like a light streaming through our stained-glass windows ...a vision of the power of God sustaining life in the broken body and blood of Christ at the Table of the Lord. Like Bartimaeus, we might be tempted to accept the "reality" of our situation ... positioned on Randolph Street in a place where we are quick to say how the population has changed ...how people have come and gone from Thomasville over the years. We might even be tempted to believe that we can't grow as a church ...that we can't be much different than we are today. We might be tempted to feel powerless to change. But also like Bartimaeus, we are becoming aware that we are positioned where Jesus is present and that faith in Jesus will give us the power to stand.

Like Bartimaeus, we are beginning to remember who we really are, that we are the Church, and that we can present ourselves at the feet of Christ with a faith-filled expectation that we can change, that we can be whom we know in our hearts we are called to be as the Body of Christ. Today we are positioned in a prominent place on a prominent road for a divine encounter. We are given the opportunity to call out in faith, "Jesus, Savior, have mercy on us!"

So when Jesus turns and asks us what it is that we want, what will our response be? Do we want money that will help us keep on doing what we've been doing? Do we want Jesus to tell us that it's okay to keep sitting, being silent, in our position by the side of the road? Do we want Jesus to give us a blessing to continue living our lives according to the *status quo*? Do we want someone else ...some generous donors, maybe ...to take greater financial responsibility for the life of Memorial?

Surely it is our desire, like Bartimaeus, to *see* ...to have vision. Surely we want to live a life of power and passion and purpose and vision. If I'm right and that *is* what we want, then we need to follow the example of Bartimaeus. We need to stand firm in our position as "The Big Rock" church in Thomasville ...we need to expect an encounter with Jesus ...we need to allow our faith in Jesus to help us throw off some cloaks ...cloaks of old ways of doing ministry, cloaks of our security and control, cloaks of what we're comfortable and familiar with in ministry and even in worship style. We need to throw them off, and in so doing, these will be profound acts of faith in Christ. It surely means that we're willing not just to call out to Jesus, not just to speak the words of faith, "O yes, Jesus, I believe in your power," but to change our behavior. It means that we're willing to put ourselves in the way of Jesus, crying out, "Mercy! *Kyrie Eleison!* Lord, have mercy!" trusting that Jesus can and will sustain us.

When we are prepared to do this ...when we are willing to position ourselves for another encounter with Jesus the Christ we will be prepared to throw off the cloak of powerlessness. We will look around us and see that it is not impossible for us to grow ...that there are churches around us here in the Triad region that are vibrant and growing. We will be prepared to stand up and claim the power of Christ among us, to celebrate the gifts that this congregation has to offer, and to invite others into the life of this congregation. You and I have found life and sustenance here. Others need that life and sustenance, too. We have the power, by faith, to live into this reality. We need to claim our true identity as the Church of Christ, as a community of love, forgiveness, and hope. We have the power, by faith, to live into this reality.

Another cloak we need to continue to throw off are any practices that keep people sidelined and silent ...any ways in which we set ourselves up as the ones who decide who is worthy to follow Christ. This will mean being more intentional and inclusive in our hospitality and in our ministry to all God's people. It will mean that we release our control and our

judgmental attitudes so that *all people* are *always* welcome to worship, to serve, to share Christ with us. We have the power, by faith, to live into this reality.

We need to throw off the cloak of scarcity - the lie that we don't have the financial resources necessary to flourish and to grow. One of the greatest acts of faith that we make in life is the act of sacrificial giving. It is, in many ways, the place where, for our faith, the proverbial rubber hits the road. The national average for United Methodist pledges is somewhere between 2 - 3% of income. I don't know where we are in comparison with that national average, but my sense is that, if we release our control and mistrust and fear, throwing off our security blanket and entrusting our lives to Christ and Christ's mission here at Memorial United Methodist Church, we will see more than enough estimates-of-giving or pledges, not only to sustain our ministries, but also to have an excess. We have the power, by faith, to live into this reality.

Being positioned for a new beginning ...the result of a divine encounter. That is today's theme. We celebrate the new thing that God wants to do among us. We look forward in hope. We are called to stand up, throw off the cloaks of our old ways of life and recommit ourselves to God's mission here at Memorial. The heart of this new beginning is this: the one who is taking over is none other than Jesus Christ. We can allow Christ to take over or we can stay wrapped up in our security blankets by the side of the road. Let us put our faith in Christ's takeover. And then put our lives and our actions and our attitudes and our money where our faith is. We have the power, through Christ, to make it happen. So take heart, get up, Jesus is calling us! Let us position ourselves for a divine encounter.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.