

Sermon

October 25, 2014

For those of you who have been around me, heard me preach, and observed me help lead this parish over the past six-plus years, you may have noticed some themes: study, as demonstrated in EFM, Community of Hope, Home Groups, Wednesday evening speakers, Christian Education for all ages, and Bible studies; and service, as demonstrated in a wide range of ministries from the long term Pantry ministry to Backpacks of Love, the prison ministry, community garden, Church of the Common Ground, and more. This is in addition to all the “normal” church ministry we do such as choir, altar guild, Sunday servers, preschool, and so on.

That emphasis reflects who I am and my sense of the priorities of ministry. And I think it reflects what this parish is and is becoming. There is wide spread commitment among us to study and serve as ways to grow in our faith. And I think that is great! But there is something else that we must never forget, something that is clear as we hear the Gospel this morning. There are times when the best thing we can do when we come to church is cry out with Bartimaeus, “Have mercy on me, Lord... have mercy.”

Several of us in this parish are going through a difficult time right now. Some of us are ill, seriously ill. Others have loved ones—parents, spouses, even children who are suffering. In addition to physical illness, there are folks with mental illness, addiction, and special needs; others are in prison or on parole or probation. Those challenges are being faced by several of our friends and family members and fellow parishioners this morning. So when we are in that place in life, hearing sermons about doing more and learning more, no matter how true and well-intended, are not what we need to hear.

So if that description fits you today, know that crying out “Have mercy on me” is not only okay, it is the good and right thing for you to do, to let God know-- and let us know-- what you need. Do not feel like you need to handle things on your own. No matter how brave and strong you are or your loved one is, we all need help when we go through severe hardship.

That help can take different forms. Sometimes it is a friend listening. Perhaps it is filling out a prayer request form. If you do not know, we have an Intercessors Group that is committed to praying for people when they face illness and other challenges.

Of course you can contact Mtr. Bonnie, Dcn. Tom or me, and let us know what is going on. We will be with you and support you in prayer and caring and the sacraments of the church. And we have the Pastoral Support and Community of Hope groups to help the clergy provide care for people in need.

We also offer more tangible care such as providing meals to people when you do not have the time, energy, or resources to make meals yourself. And our In Stitches group knits and crochets prayer shawls and blankets for people facing chemo or other serious medical conditions. I can tell you from personal experience that it is almost worth being sick to get a prayer blanket and some great meals. Norma Norris’ chess pie was worth five days in the hospital, at least for me.

So when we cry out for mercy, often God answers through people. Our doctors and nurses and other care professionals... our fellow church members... and family members who love and care for us during all different times of our lives. Healing occurs, miracles happen. But even when the healing we want and pray for does not come, we are not alone. People love us in a way that reveals God love. And that love gives us hope even during dark times.

There are two new parish initiatives that we are developing for people who are crying out for mercy. Both address the people affected by hardship that loved ones are going through. Next month on November 11 at 6:30 pm, we will hold an initial meeting for Caregivers. These are all the people who do the lion's share of work when a loved one is sick. They often pay the most in terms of an emotional price when someone they love is suffering and they are not sure how to help.

Our hope for this Caregiver group is mutual support for the participants and also helping the church know what we need to do better to care for the caregiver and the people they care for. Our ears and our hearts are open to learn and to respond in loving and practical ways. The caregivers we want to reach out to may be helping an elderly parent, a sick spouse, a child with special needs, or any loved one facing a serious mental or physical illness. If that describes you, know you are invited to come on the 11th. Please be there if you can. And if you cannot be there, let Beth Jones, Mtr. Bonnie or me know. Tell us what is on your heart and mind as a caregiver. Your input is essential for us so we can provide a faithful and helpful response.

The second initiative is about something we often do not talk about—supporting people who have a loved one in prison, on parole, or on probation. Often there is an unspoken (or sometimes even spoken) stigma about having family members in the legal system. I have been told that family members do not often bring it up because of what has been said to them. They get a sense from others that they must have done something wrong as a parent to have a son or daughter incarcerated.

That attitude is the opposite of what we should be about as the church. For one thing, it is often simply not true. Some children grow up and out of bad homes for great and fulfilling lives. And others have every advantage and make prodigal decisions or suffer with addictions that cause heartache for themselves and their families. But regardless of the cause and effect, the church is called to come alongside those in prison and those who love them.

We have been present for some of these family members of people in the legal system with monthly meetings over the past three months. We have taken time to listen to one another in these meetings. Many of the stories have similar themes. At the end of each meeting, the feedback I have received is that this is helpful for them and something we should be sure everyone who might need this knows about. So now you know.

I want to say again that having someone you love in prison should not be a secret that you need to hide. But before many folks will be confident in sharing that, we as a community need to focus more on compassion and encouragement than on judgment and second guessing the family members of people in the legal system. The goal of this ministry is to work with these families and with all of us to help change these perceptions and offer real help.

One more thing. Let's return to the story of Bartimaeus from the Gospel. He was blind, he was begging for alms on the side of the street. He had little or nothing. But he still had something that

Jesus commended—faith. This man who was crying out for mercy had something to teach people back then as well as for us today.

So if you are crying out for mercy today, if you are afraid or tired or frustrated or angry—believe that God is present for you. And if you let us know, the members of this church will come alongside of you and be with you, too. And as you cry out, your honesty and your faith will not only help you to get the support you need-- it will help all of us as we learn by following your example of authentic trust in God. Amen.