

“Mercy”
The Reverend Michael L. Delk
St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
23rd Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 25B) – 27 & 28 October 2018
Mark 10:46-52

Have you ever wondered why Jesus asked Bartimaeus, “What do you want me to do for you?” It strikes me as a strange question. Wouldn’t it have been obvious that a blind man would want see again? One might think a more reasonable response from Jesus would have been, “Come here, and let me fix those eyes for you,” but maybe he thought it best not to make assumptions. Bartimaeus shouted out to Jesus for mercy, but wasn’t specific what sort of mercy he had in mind. Perhaps there was something else that meant even more to him than sight.

As it happened, though, Bartimaeus did want his vision back, and Jesus declared him healed by saying, “Go; your faith has made you well.” Sometimes, we wince a little when we hear those words, because one can easily conclude that if you suffer from a disease and don’t receive healing, then it’s your fault for not having enough faith.

Certainly, faith does play a major role in giving us wholeness of body, mind, and soul, and when we get sick, we need to pray for healing, and the prayers of others make a big difference, too. When others get sick, we need to pray for them. But I don’t think Jesus meant that if you’re sick and don’t get better, blame yourself for lacking faith.

There are plenty of people who have no faith in anything, and they recover from their illnesses just fine, while very faithful and prayerful people do not. But if there’s not a strict correlation between faith and health, then what did Jesus mean when he said, “Go; your faith has made you well”? I think that Jesus was pointing out to the crowd around him, “Look at Bartimaeus, because this is what faith looks like.”

First, Bartimaeus knew what he needed most. From our vantage point, it's hard to see how he couldn't. The man was blind. But sometimes people can't see what they need most, even if it's obvious to everybody else. In fact, sometimes people can't see that they have a problem at all. Denial and self-deception convince us that everything's fine. We can handle it, thank you very much, because the idea of needing something from somebody else offends our pride.

Pride seems to be one problem Bartimaeus did not have. He shamelessly shouted for help. People shushed him. "Many sternly ordered him to be quiet." But he didn't care. He knew he needed help, and he had hope that Jesus could help him, so he kept on screaming for mercy. We can almost hear the crowd murmuring, "How embarrassing. How pitiful. How undignified." (That last one came from the Episcopalians in the crowd.) "Bartimaeus, would you please shut up? You're making a fool out of yourself." I think sometimes that crowd's in our own minds, because when's the last time any of us screamed for mercy, begged for help?

Finally, when Bartimaeus heard that his cry for help had been answered, when he heard that help – not a guarantee – but help might be offered, "he sprang up and came to Jesus." He left his stuff where he sat, "throwing off his cloak," a garment of protection and concealment. He went to Jesus, told him what he needed most, and received miraculous healing.

Know what you need. Don't ignore or try to hide it. Don't let your pride or the condemnation of others – or your fear of condemnation – keep you from screaming for mercy. Listen carefully. Be ready to leave something valuable behind. Accept the help, and be grateful. That's a pretty good seven-fold model for faith. That's a pretty good way to look at how our relationship with Jesus works.

Of course, all of us fall short of the mark. We're blind to our needs, or refuse to seek help, or to accept help when it's offered. We don't want to look weak, so we pretend to be strong. We're afraid of getting our hopes up, afraid of being disappointed, because Jesus didn't heal every sick person in Palestine. We worry about what we might need to leave behind, if we take the time to seek wholeness and health.

Take, for instance, me. Most of you know that I suffer from chronic back pain, and that problem kept me from being with you in worship last weekend. In fact, it took me out of commission for the entire week. Over the years, I've sought out help and received it through skilled healers, who've made it much better. But most of you don't know that there is a silent partner in the mix that makes it much worse than it might otherwise be.

Seventeen years ago, I was living in Atlanta, and worming my way through traffic one day began to feel short of breath. I felt intense pain in my chest, started sweating profusely. Thought I was having a heart attack, and if you've driven in Atlanta, you know that's a reasonable conclusion to make.

So I pulled off the road, gave the wheel to Stephanie, and got medical help. They ran tests, and to my great relief told me that my heart was perfectly healthy. But what came next surprised and disturbed me. It was a panic attack, they told me. They referred me to specialists who ran more tests and diagnosed me with anxiety disorder and depression.

For 17 years, I have sought out and received treatment for those mental health conditions, from psychological counselors who listened without judgment and given me guidance, from psychiatrists who proscribed medicine to help keep my brain chemistry balanced, and from osteopathic practitioners who treat my body, mind, and soul as one integrated whole, because that's who we are as creatures created in the image of God – a kind of trinity of body, mind, and

soul unified as a single person. When one part hurts, the others do, too. And I hope it goes without saying that I've prayed a lot about this over the years.

Great progress has been made, and I'm grateful. There are many more good days than bad, but last Saturday, I fell headfirst into what's called a major depressive episode. It seldom happens to me anymore, and it's hard to describe. For me, an overwhelming sense of dread and futility strikes. My perspective gets so skewed, my ability to think rationally so paralyzed, that I feel totally worthless, a waste of space. You would not recognize me in this state, because I am very much not my normal self. My nervous system goes haywire, which increases my back pain and decreases my tolerance to pain, a vicious cycle.

Somehow, in the midst of this, a thought arose, one that they really drill into you at seminary, that "When priests get into trouble, they call their bishop for help." So I did, and Bishop White helped me and encouraged me to seek out even more help to work through this episode and to learn more about how to see this coming before it lands right on top of me. For the last week, I've been participating in group therapy, all morning every morning, Monday through Friday, and that work will continue until I can move forward to the next stage of my healing and recovery.

This may be more than you want to know, and if so, I am genuinely sorry for the imposition. You may have many questions, but right now, I'll briefly answer three: "How did this happen? How can someone help a person struggling with something like this? Why are you telling us this?"

First, how did this happen? It's hard to know exactly what triggers a major depressive episode. It can start suddenly. One minute you're managing OK, or at least think you are, and then the bottom just falls out. But stress and, more importantly, how one responds to stress, is a

big factor. Many of you have expressed concerns about my health, my workload, my perfectionism – most of the pressure I feel comes from inside rather than from outside – and I have listened to you, but obviously not well enough. I was blind-sided last Saturday, because I hadn't been investing the time and energy needed to be aware of where I was emotionally and spiritually and physically. That's going to change. In fact, it already is changing. I owe that to you and my family and myself.

Second, how can someone help a person struggling with something like this? You have already been helping me, through your prayers and kindness and the support you give me and my family in more ways than I could name. It is a great blessing to serve such a genuinely caring congregation. I ask for your patience and acceptance and understanding. I ask us all to stay focused on the work God has given us to do together. This has happened. I'm receiving lots of help, but the focus needs to be on God, not me. And please keep praying.

Finally, why are you telling us this? For us to thrive together as parish and priest, I think there are things we need to know about each other – not everything, but some things. To me, mental illness is no different from physical illness. For instance, if I were diabetic and managing it well, I wouldn't see why you'd need to know that. But if I went into a diabetic coma for a week, then concealing that from you would feel dishonest to me.

I also hope that this may be an opportunity to help shake away those lingering vestiges of shame that have for too long been attached to mental health issues. Some still believe that people with mental conditions lack faith or moral character. They just need to snap out of it. To me, these attitudes aren't much different from the crowd that tried to shush Bartimaeus, because they often deter people who need help from seeking it out and receiving it. In this country alone, thousands of people die each year, because they need help but are afraid to seek it out.

Some might find that comparison strained, because Bartimaeus shouted directly to Jesus for mercy, but I believe that Christ has inspired scientists with knowledge and skill to develop medicines that help people like me who struggle with things like depression. I believe that Christ shows up in counseling sessions and in group therapy. When I get help from mental health professionals or my doctor or my dentist, I see Jesus in them caring for me, as they use their God-given gifts for health and healing. So when I go to get that help, and it's not always easy, I do see it as an act of faith, because it mimics what Bartimaeus did, which Jesus praised. It's the same pattern.

Know what you need. Don't ignore or try to hide it. Don't let your pride or the condemnation of others keep you from seeking for mercy. Listen carefully. Be ready to leave something valuable behind to receive the help you need. Accept the help, and be grateful.

Amen.