

## Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time B October 28, 2018

- **The healing of Bartimaeus and how this story connects to our lives**
- **The right side of justice**

Today's readings, especially the Gospel, are very powerful. Before I comment on the Gospel, I'd like to begin with a commentary on a verse from the second reading from Hebrews:

*"Beset by human weakness, the priest is able to deal patiently with others."*

This is a reference to the high priest of Israel who, according to the author, is "able to deal patiently with others because of his own weaknesses." Hopefully, I can say that about myself and you can say it about yourself. Sometimes a person would say to me, "I need to go to confession, but I'm a bit embarrassed by my sins." Or sometimes people think that their sins would shock me. My usual response is: "There's nothing you're going to tell me that I haven't done myself or that I couldn't do, given the right set of circumstances." Do you believe that about yourself? Our own weaknesses should make us more compassionate. Unfortunately, that is not always the case. Sometimes, for conscious or usually unconscious reasons, we may rail against the very sin that we are guilty of. A good example of this is a famous television evangelist who railed against sexual sins only to be caught himself soliciting a prostitute.

On the other hand, our own weaknesses should not cause us to water down the Gospel. Every preacher knows, or should know, that he could be preaching a message that he does not practice perfectly. The great St. Francis de Sales used to say: "*Woe to me if I only preach what I practice.*" All of us, including the clergy, are always trying to catch up on the Gospel that we are preaching.

### **The healing of Bartimaeus**

In today's Gospel, we encounter a blind beggar who becomes a disciple of Jesus. At this time in Mark's Gospel, Jesus is teaching on *discipleship*. He is having a tough time of it because the disciples are a dense or blind lot. They just don't get it. (Mark presents the disciples in a denser light than the other evangelists.) When Jesus speaks about himself as a *suffering* Messiah, the disciples are busy jockeying for key places

in his new Kingdom. In this way, they show themselves to be blinder than Bartimaeus, the blind beggar.

Now let us look at several parts of this beautiful and profound story.

*"Jesus...have pity on me!" He gives expression to his pain.*

When Bartimaeus hears that Jesus is coming down the road, he begins to cry out: "*Jesus, Son of David, have pity on me.*" In crying out thus, Bartimaeus gives expression to his pain and suffering. Commenting on this verse in today's Gospel, Fr. Dennis McBride sees in Bartimaeus' cry a wonderful example of what is called in the Scriptures the 'Prayer of Lamentation.' *Prayers of Lamentation are cries from the heart, shouts of suffering, groans of anguish, screams for help. They are written on a bed of pain, but they express the hope that things will change, that God will listen. Lamentation is the voice of suffering:*

*Have mercy on me, Lord, I have no strength....  
I am exhausted with my groaning;  
every night I drench my pillow with tears;  
I bedew my bed with weeping.  
My eyes waste away with grief;  
I have grown old surrounded by my foes.*  
*Psalm 6*

*The expression of suffering is intended to be more than just self-expression; it is made out of the hope that things can change. Lamentation, therefore, is not pessimistic; it refuses to remain powerless and passive, so it expresses its longing for change. The Prayer of Lamentation makes a bridge between silent endurance and change.*

Bartimaeus' cry stresses the importance of giving expression to our pain. He could have said to himself: "God already knows my need; I don't need to bother him," or "Jesus is too busy to be concerned about anybody like me." But Bartimaeus does neither. Instead, he verbally expresses his need to Jesus. We might ask ourselves: How easy or hard is it for us to give expression to our pain? To what extent is our tendency to suffer in silence?

*"People rebuked Bartimaeus, telling him to be quiet."  
The uncaring and oppressive crowd*

Mark continues his story, noting that “*many rebuked [Bartimaeus] telling him to be quiet.*” How insensitive and uncaring! Some of these people could have been Jesus’ disciples. They are totally blind to the pain and suffering of this poor man. Most likely, they all know him. He is a familiar part of the landscape, just like the many homeless people we see walking our streets on a daily basis. The crowd represents all those who do not want suffering people to express their plight. Hearing the cry of the poor may mean unjust structures may need to be changed. Listening to the cry of the suffering may demand a change in us that we may be resistant to make. *But Bartimaeus continues to yell out: “Son of David, have pity on me.”*

We might think that Bartimaeus may have been intimidated by the oppressive voices of those who tell him: “*Be quiet!*” and “*Shut up!*” But the crowd’s attempt to quiet Bartimaeus seems to only motivate him to cry out all the more. He yells out: “*Jesus, have pity on me!*”

This is a wonderful example of a man professing faith in a hostile environment. How many of us would have the courage to continue professing our faith if those around us were rebuking us? How many of us would have the courage to continue shouting “*Unjust! Unjust!*” if we were being threatened with retaliation? How many of us would tend to be very private with our faith because we were ashamed of it or did not want to cause waves in the workplace or in our social circle?

*Jesus stops.*

Jesus, like the crowd, could have ignored the cry of the poor man. He could have said: “Call my office for an appointment.” But he doesn’t. He “stops the procession” and allows the cry of the poor to reach his ears and heart. I think of all those who work with the poor—inside and outside our parish—how they, too, allow the cry of the poor to touch their hearts. I thank God for you.

*“Take courage, get up, Jesus is calling you.”*

When Jesus says, “*Call over the blind man,*” the crowd’s attitude changes. They who, a few moments ago, rebuked the blind beggar, now say to him, “*Take courage; get up, Jesus is calling you.*” The compassion of Jesus seems to have rubbed off on the crowd. The good example of others has great power to change our perceptions and attitudes. Or we might say that Jesus’ attitude and behavior help to *awaken* the consciousness of the crowd. They too are being enlightened. They, who previously were blind to the plight of the blind beggar, are now awakened to his need. Perhaps, over the years, the good example of others have opened our eyes to the sacredness of human life, the immorality of racism and

cheating, and the plight of the poor at home and abroad.

In the journey of life, there may be people, including in our church family, who are either a *help* or a *hindrance* to our faith life. Those who practice a rigid, legalistic Christianity will not attract others to Christ. Those who say one thing and practice another will not attract others to Christ. On the other hand, a church family and individuals who are hospitable, faith-filled, caring, and enthusiastic about its faith life will attract seekers.

*Jesus: “What do you want me to do for you?”*

With the help and encouragement of a changed crowd, the blind man comes to Jesus who asks him: “*What do you want me to do for you?*” If Jesus asked us that question, how would we respond? Jesus’ question is a good one for us to take time to pray about.

*“Master, I want to see.”*

Jesus knows well what Bartimaeus needs but he wants Bartimaeus to give expression to his need, to *name* it. We too need to *give expression to our needs*. Fortunately, very few of us need *physical sight*, but we can be sure that all of us are in need of *spiritual sight* and *insight*. We can always assume that each of us suffers from spiritual blindness. There are things that we should see but are blind to. We may be blind to our own goodness or the goodness of others. We may be blind to our own sin or to the needs of others. We may be blind to the meaning of the Scriptures or Church teachings. Hence, our prayer should be: “*Lord, that I may see myself as you see me. Lord, that I may see your plan for my life.*” I would appreciate it if you would often pray for me and our parish staff, that we may *see God’s plan* for our parish.

*Bartimaeus receives sight.*

Receiving *physical sight* must have been a wonderful gift but receiving the gift of faith is even more wonderful. While all those around Jesus are blind as to who he is, Bartimaeus receives the gift to see. John Milton, the great poet, became blind during his life. After he came to *accept* his blindness, he said his “whole being was filled with the light of God.”

*“And he followed Jesus.” - A call to discipleship*

Following Jesus, Bartimaeus becomes a disciple. This is the constant call of Jesus to each of us to become his faithful disciple with all that it involves.

Commenting on this part of the story, Fr. Flor McCarthy writes the following Helen Keller story.

*The story of Bartimaeus has relevance for us on another level. The story is not just a healing story. It is a discipleship story. St. Mark tells us that as soon as*

*Bartimaeus got his sight back, he “followed Jesus along the way.”*

*That doesn't simply mean that he joined the crowd on the road to Jerusalem. There can be no doubt what Mark intends: Bartimaeus became a follower of Jesus. In other words, he became a disciple. That is the climax of the story.*

*From being a mere believer, Bartimaeus became a disciple. There is a big difference between the two. One could be a believer without it having any effect on one's life. But when one becomes a disciple, one tries to live as a Christian.*

*Physical sight is a marvelous gift that we should never take for granted. But faith is more precious still. As sight is to blindness, so is faith to unbelief.*

*We should make our own the heart-felt prayer of Bartimaeus:*

*“Lord, that I may see.” That we see more and better with the great gift of physical sight. And that we may see everything through the eyes of faith. Because without faith we will always be in the dark.*

## **Story**

*Helen Keller was only nineteen months old when she went blind and deaf. Yet, thanks to the nurturing of Miss Anne Sullivan, she learned to read, write and speak. She went on to live a full life, and became noted for her work for the handicapped.*

*She tells how one day she asked a friend of hers who had just returned from a long walk in the woods what she had seen. Her friend replied, “Nothing in particular.”*

*On hearing this, Helen asked herself, “How was this possible when I, who cannot hear or see, find hundreds of things to interest me through mere touch? I feel the delicate shape and design of a leaf. I pass my hands lovingly over the rough bark of a pine tree. Occasionally, I place my hand quietly on a small tree, and if I'm lucky, I feel the happy quiver of a bird in full song.”*

*This led her to conclude, “The greatest calamity that can befall people, is not that they should be born blind, but that they should have eyes, yet fail to see.”*

## **The Right Side of Justice**

The following article by Meghan J. Clark was in the October 2018 issue of *U.S. Catholic*. I will be interested in hearing your thoughts on this controversial issue.

Abiding by the law is a preeminent American value, yet a fixation with the letter of the law is often used to perpetuate injustice. Scripture says that law is important but also warns against a narrow focus on law at the

expense of dignity or mercy. In one of his more scandalous moments, Jesus breaks religious law when he heals the sick on the Sabbath. According to Deuteronomy, the legal punishment for a woman caught in adultery was death. But Jesus intervenes on behalf of the woman caught in adultery. “She broke the law” was not all that mattered.

A just law is one that upholds human dignity and is directed at the common good. For St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, laws that fail to do so are unjust and improper. An unjust law is not binding upon Christian consciences. Movements for justice often invoke this basic Christian tradition challenging unjust laws and structures. During the violent and repressive military dictatorship in El Salvador, Oscar Romero urged members of the police and military to disobey unjust orders and stop the repression. Preaching days before his assassination, Romero reminded the faithful, “The law has to be at the service of human dignity and not focused on legal details that so often can trample people's honor.” Any law that dehumanizes or violates human dignity is unjust.

In contrast, American culture often reduces law and justice so that colloquially *legal* and *just* are used interchangeably. This is perhaps most evident and dangerous with regard to immigration and racial justice. After a parish panel on immigration I sat on last year, an older man charged toward the table furious. “How dare you malign Martin Luther King, Jr., and suggest he advocated breaking the law! He would never have broken the law,” he insisted.

Conflating law and justice requires ignoring history. Slavery and segregation were legal but they were never just. In his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” King reminded his critics that “everything Hitler did in Germany was legal” and it was illegal to “aid and comfort” a Jewish person in Hitler's Germany. King broke unjust laws and organized others to do so as well. Civil disobedience as practiced by King exemplifies a deep respect for rule of law while refusing to idolize a particular legal system. Laws matter, but they must be just in both form and application.

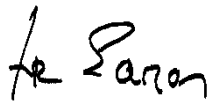
King noticed the greatest opposition to dismantling unjust laws often comes from those “more devoted to order than to justice” and those who have a “shallow understanding” of the situation. Family histories of immigration are one example of how a shallow understanding by people of good will impedes justice and prioritizes the status quo over justice. Today's immigrants are pitted against earlier “good immigrants” who came the “right way” and followed the law.

In 1848 my ancestors Timothy and Margaret Clarke, newlyweds from Ireland, boarded a boat for the United States, fleeing poverty and famine. They are the quintessential example of “the right way” invoked in today’s public debate. However, if my ancestors were subject to today’s immigration laws, they would have died in Ireland or migrated illegally. Of the millions of Irish immigrants who arrived in the United States during the 19th century, 95 percent would be denied legal entry based upon today’s laws.

Today, individuals wait years, sometimes decades, in the legal process to join family members. For those fleeing violence, persecution, and poverty, there are no good options. Everyone agrees the current system is broken, yet political will to create a just system continues to elude the nation. As Christians, we are called to distinguish between what is legal and what is just, to challenge unjust laws, and to prioritize dignity over order.

(Reprinted by permission of U.S. Catholic magazine (<http://www.uscatholic.org>) U.S. Catholic is published by the Claretians. Call 1-800-328-6515 for subscription information.)

Have a blessed week,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Fr. Aaron". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.