

Blind Bart

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on October 23, 1988, the 22nd Sunday after Pentecost. Scripture Lessons: Jeremiah 31:7-9; Psalm 126; Hebrews 5:1-6; Mark 10:46-52.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Last Wednesday evening we were just getting ready to pray at our small, informal weekly prayer meeting in the parlor of the church. We'd shared prayer concerns with one another when a man, probably in his thirties, appeared in the doorway asking for the pastor; a tall, slim, bearded man, dressed in old bluejeans and wearing only a thin jacket for protection against the cold. "I'm the pastor", I said, "What can I do for you?" "I've been hitch-hiking", he said. "I'm on my way to Baltimore and I just need someplace to spend the night, someplace warm." Wednesday evening the temperature had fallen and the forecast was for lows in the thirties. ~~"All I need is a floor to sleep on."~~

My honest first reaction was, "Doggone this beggar interrupting our prayer meeting." Then I thought, "Why not just tell him to spend the night in the church? But I'm not really authorized to do that and, besides, what if he robs the place or vandalizes it?" The Neighborhood Services Center was closed so I couldn't send him over there. I thought briefly about sending him over to the Nazarene church. I really just wanted to get rid of him so we could pray. I didn't smile at him at all. I gave him the stern, paternalistic look of a father irritated when one of his children have interrupted his favorite t.v. program with some trivial request.

By that time I ^{no longer felt like praying} ~~was thoroughly out of the mood of prayer~~ so I took him into my study and made some phone calls trying to find a place for him to stay. I didn't have much luck at first until Connie Winchester came in for choir practice and suggested that I call *His Mission*, a home for the homeless in Kennett Square. I called and discovered they had just one bed.

I offered to take him and he agreed to go. For the first time I asked him his name. It was Russ, he said.

For the first time I began to feel guilty about the way I'd been treating him. I began to think of my sermon about a beggar who cried out to Jesus for mercy and how the disciples of Jesus tried to push him aside and send him away. And I thought, "I'm really no different than those disciples." And I thought, Blind Bartimaeus wasn't the only blind person there that day. The disciples themselves were blind. They were blind to the purpose of Christ's ministry. As they looked down the road they saw only glory and power for themselves in the kingdom of God. They were blind to the cross even though Jesus kept telling them over and over again.

How blind the church can still be. How easily we lose sight of our mission. So often, particularly at this time of the year when the stewardship campaign gets under way and we're thinking about next year's budget, ministers make the mistake of thinking that people exist to fill the sanctuary; to fill our Sunday School rooms; that they exist to provide money to keep the church going. We have a tendency to lose sight of the purpose of the church which is to ~~minister~~ ^{to heal & empower & forgive} and serve people in the name of Jesus Christ.

Last Wednesday's incident also got me thinking about the plight of beggars in our town and in our nation. We usually don't call them beggars today. We call them the homeless, the poor, the disadvantaged. It's a problem that's increasing. ^{I can understand better why there were beggars in the days of Jesus,} I don't know ~~all the reasons~~ why we have ^{today} beggars in a nation like ours. Some say a lack of affordable housing and good-paying jobs is the root of the problem. An article in yesterday's Wilmington News Journal said that in one shelter nearly half the people work full time and some have two full-time, low-paying jobs and yet they

still can't afford decent housing. More than half the people who stay in overnight shelters are mentally ill. ^{Many come with young children.} They're not the kind of people most churches go after as prospective members and yet, in their various ways, I wonder if they are not calling out to Jesus to have mercy on them.

On the way to Kennett Square with Russ last Wednesday night I learned that he'd been employed by the Post Office but not anymore. He didn't have a home. He didn't have a job. He was very well spoken and I wouldn't be surprised if he were a college educated man. I was curious about his life. I said to him, "Forgive me if you feel I'm invading your privacy. Could you tell me about yourself." I sensed sadness and despair in his response. He answered firmly but politely, "I'd rather not talk about my private life." And that was it. So I was left to surmise from what kind of family he came, what kind of home he lived in, what kind of parents he had. Had he ever been married? Did he have children? Why has a man in his thirties or forties been reduced to hitch-hiking and begging for a place to sleep?

I've never really had to beg. God has been very good to me and my family. I was blessed being born into a family where my mother and father loved one another and treated one another with respect. My father always had work. We always lived in a nice neighborhood, in a nice home with plenty to eat. I grew up in a protected environment; to this day I don't know what marijuana looks or smells like and I've never personally known anybody who even tried cocaine. And I've also been blessed to have a church home, brothers and sisters in Christ, who would never let me go begging if a need arose. I've had so many advantages. But so many people ^{with great disadvantages. They are born severely} are born handicapped; not necessarily physically handicapped but emotionally, socially, and spiritually handicapped.

Thursday morning I read an editorial in the paper that made me think

again of Russ. It was an editorial on the plight of those three gray whales trapped in the ice off the coast of Barrow, Alaska. This is what it said,

"Has the world turned upside down?

"Three gray whales trapped in the ice off the coast of Barrow, Alaska, have captured the attention of America. Their plight is recounted on newspaper front pages and in the top slot on the nightly news.

"The question is not one of news judgment but of values.

"Each year in May, the magnificent gray whales migrate from the seas off southern California and Mexico to the cold regions of the Bering Sea and Arctic Ocean. In late September they return south. Some-- perhaps a dozen each year-- don't make it. Death in the ice is what happens to those whales who tarry overlong at the feeding ground. It's nature's way.

"In the continental United States another sign of winter's onslaught is taking place. Millions of homeless persons are starting to plan how they will save themselves from the icy temperatures and foul weather. Shelters are staked out-- and vacant houses and heater grates and culverts.

"Will the plight of these, our fellow human beings, make the headlines? Will there be charts and maps showing how difficult it is to survive winter in America without shelter, with little food?

"... were (we) willing to commit the energy and resources now being used to save three whales to saving America's homeless, human lives would be saved."

Jesus healed Blind Bartimaeus. His sight was restored and he followed Jesus. I wonder if, a few days later, he watched Jesus ride in triumph on a donkey into the temple area on that first Palm Sunday? Did he hear how Jesus had been arrested, tried, flogged and led out to be crucified? Was he

there with the crowds watching the slow, obscene torture of the cross?
How would you feel if you saw the one who restored your sight being
tortured to death within five days?

I don't know the answers to those questions but I do believe that none
of us can appreciate the meaning of this story about blind Bartimæus until
we have recognized how St Mark has set it as the last healing miracle that
Jesus performed before he was crucified. What the gospel of St Mark is
saying is that however we see Jesus of Nazareth- as a miracle worker, as
God in the flesh, as the Lord, or as the second Person in the Holy Trinity-
we haven't begun to understand him until we have eyes to see him on the
cross at Jerusalem. Jesus is the *crucified* Messiah.

Like Blind Bartimæus we have come to Jesus this morning asking him
for his mercy. What if each one of us were to hear the Risen Christ, who is
present with us this morning, ask, "What do you want me to do for you?"
How would you answer? After having read and listen to our Gospel lesson
I think I might answer, "Lord Jesus, I don't want to be blind like the
disciples were for so long. I don't want to be blind to the reason you died
on the cross. I don't want to be blind to the needs of others. I don't want
to be blind to people like Bartimæus and Russ. I want to see these poor
beggars as well as all the more affluent people moving into the nice homes
being built around Oxford. I want to see them all as people who need you,
Lord, who need the fellowship of your brothers and sisters. I want to see
them as more than a market for our religious wares but as men and women
for whom you died. Master, let me receive my sight."

Let us pray: Open our eyes, that we might see Christ. Open our eyes that we might see men and
women with the eyes of Christ. Amen.