Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost

October 28, 2018

Neal MacPherson

FOLLOWING JESUS ON THE WAY Jeremiah 31:7–9

Psalm 126

Mark 10:46–52

The story of Jesus giving sight to Bartimaeus Son of Timaeus, the blind beggar, is a wonderful story of healing. It takes its place among all those other healing stories associated with Jesus. But when we read the story of Bartimaeus *in context*, that is, in relationship to the stories that precede it and follow it, it begins to take on meanings that are nothing less than remarkable.

Just before the story of the healing of Bartimaeus, we have in the Gospel of Mark two stories that are memorable in their own right. First, we have the story of the rich man who approaches Jesus and asks him what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus recites many of the Ten Commandments, and the rich man says that he has obeyed these since his youth. Then Jesus says that he lacks one thing. He must sell all that he has and give the proceeds to the poor and then leave everything behind and follow Jesus. This is what Jesus asks of him. The man, being rich, could not bring himself to do this, and so he goes away grieving.

What a contrast to blind Bartimaeus, whose faith is so strong that in the end he follows Jesus even without being asked to do so. In the beginning, Bartimaeus believes that Jesus can restore his sight. He is so confident in his belief that he cries out to get the attention of Jesus, and then disobeys the crowd when they try to silence him (so much for the wisdom of the crowd). He is so expectant that when Jesus calls him out of the crowd, he throws off his cloak (his one possession that he is willing to give up as contrasted to the rich man who could not bring himself to give up the many things he owned). And instead of approaching Jesus with a question, such as the rich man did, Bartimaeus cries out for mercy, and when Jesus acknowledges him, he springs up and comes to him. And unlike the rich man who cannot bring himself to follow Jesus, Bartimaeus, after regaining his sight, immediately follows Jesus on the way.

Let us now turn to the story that comes just before the story of Bartimaeus. You will remember it. This is the story of James and John asking Jesus to grant them positions of power in the kingdom to come. They ask Jesus to grant them the privilege of sitting, one at his right hand and one at his left, when he comes into his glory. They do not know what they are asking. They seek power, but will they be willing to accept the cost of discipleship when Jesus makes his way to the cross? “Oh yes,” they say, “we can do that.” But of course, as it turns out, they will not. They will desert Jesus in his hour of trial. They will run away from their discipleship.

What a contrast is Bartimaeus! He does not seek power; he seeks healing. He does not run away from discipleship. He springs up, takes heart, and after he has regained his sight, he immediately follows Jesus.

Notice also what takes place following the story of Bartimaeus. Jesus and the disciples are leaving the town of Jericho to make their way to Jerusalem and the cross. In the very next scene, we find Jesus preparing to enter Jerusalem on a colt. So when Bartimaeus decides to follow Jesus out of the depth of his faith, he really is making his way with Jesus towards the cross. The discipleship Bartimaeus takes on is not easy or convenient. It is nothing less than a costly discipleship.

And so, my sisters and brothers, what can we learn from all of this? Let us say in the first place that our discipleship begins when we acknowledge our need for the mercy and grace of God. Discipleship is impossible for those who seek power or those who have no need for God. Discipleship is given birth out of an acknowledgement of our own need for healing and wholeness. Furthermore, discipleship requires a “letting go,” a letting go of power, a letting go of certainty, a letting go of security, a letting go of comfort. Discipleship requires faith, and faith has very little to do with power or certainty or security or comfort. Faith has nothing to do with what we already have and see. Faith is hoping for that which we cannot see. Faith is basically a trust in God’s leading. Faith is an act of throwing ourselves upon the mercy and grace of God, hopeful that we will receive what we need. That is what Bartimaeus did. He could have decided to settle into his life as a blind beggar. He could have said, “this is my lot; this is my station in life.” But his faith would not allow him to remain where he was. Knowing his need for sight, his faith led him to seek God’s healing through the healing touch of Jesus. His faith led him to throw himself upon the mercy and grace of God. And then, being granted healing in his life, he decides to follow Jesus.

Discipleship does not come easily for us Christians. When the Christian church began to occupy a place of privilege and power in Western society, it lost sight of the cost of discipleship. It sought establishment rather than discipleship. Christianity became an easy path to follow. To be a Christian, you just had to be born into the Roman Empire. The decision to be a Christian had already been made for you. Discipleship was not something to be chosen for one’s self. It became something for others, not for me. Of course, throughout Christian history, there have been those who have struggled against an easy Christianity. We need only think of the monastic movements and people like Saint Francis who understood the cost of discipleship and who took a stand against Christendom and its love affair with power. We think of Martin Luther (this, by the way, is Reformation Sunday) who also took a stand against the abuses of Christendom. And, in our own immediate past, we have the witness of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Dorothy Day and Martin Luther King who took the path of costly discipleship. It was Dietrich Bonhoeffer who during the 1940’s in Nazi Germany wrote words about cheap grace as grace that does not require us to follow Jesus Christ. Wrote Bonhoeffer,

Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without

requiring repentance, baptism without church

discipline, Communion without confession, absolution

without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace

without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace

without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate. . . . Such

grace is *costly* because it calls us to follow and it is

*grace* because it calls us to follow *Jesus Christ.*

(Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*)

For the most part, however, since Christianity became the dominant religion of the Western World some sixteen centuries ago, Christians have been satisfied with cheap grace. They have allowed themselves to follow an easy path, without discipleship. They have been like the rich man who could not bear the cost of following Jesus, or they have been like James and John who sought power rather than servanthood.

Thank God that all of that has changed, however. Western Christianity has been and continues to be diminished in influence and power. Now we have the opportunity to regain a true understanding of what it means to follow Jesus. Now we can begin in a new way to appreciate stories like the story of Bartimaeus who cast aside his cloak and sprang up to run towards Jesus, and then, sight restored, left all behind and immediately followed him, not even knowing that it would require him to accompany Jesus towards a cross.

My friends, discipleship requires us to follow Jesus on the way wherever he would lead us. It requires us to set aside cheap grace and all notions of worldly power and success in our lives and in the life of the church. Discipleship for us may not lead us to a cross, but in truth it will lead us along paths unknown, paths that may not be all that safe and sure. It will require us to nurture within ourselves a steadfast faith like the faith of Bartimaeus. It will require a dependence upon the grace and mercy of God.

Dare we follow Jesus on the way? May God help us so to do. Amen.