“Unencumbered”

Hebrews 7:23-38 Mark 10:46-52

Twenty First Sunday after Pentecost, Year B, October 24, 2021

First Presbyterian Church, Sandpoint, Idaho

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Three things stand out for us in this morning’s readings. Three things.

One is so strong that it stands in its own sentence, “They came to Jericho.” Jericho, a city loaded with imagery for the Hebrew people. We read this morning just the first five verses of a longer story of Joshua leading the Hebrew people into Jericho, which ends their forty years of wandering in the desert and introduces them into the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey. We didn’t read the Warrior Level scripture verses where they kill all the men, women, and children in the town, both military and civilian, along with animals such as sheep and donkeys. That level of consciousness, to assume God commands them to use this kind of force, is part of the cultural context for that stage of history. Scripture is written by the winners. But our focus this morning is on the broader imagery of Jericho as a town of transition, a threshold place that symbolizes movement from bondage into freedom, from being lost and wandering to finding a home and an identity. There is power in faith that trusts God’s action and activity to bring about this release.

Mark’s passage involves the last stop before Jesus heads to Jerusalem, the final healing story, and the end of the Messianic Secret where he heals someone but then tells people to keep it quiet. This man cries out, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” and Jesus doesn’t tell him to be silent. The man who is blind does not show the same fear and lack of comprehension as the disciples had done earlier, nor does he turn away like the rich young ruler, but rather ends up following as he chooses to respond to Christ’s call. “They came to Jericho,” this city of rigid walls tumbling down, overcome by faithfulness.

In the Hebrew scriptures, the people quietly march around Jericho six times. Then on the seventh time they shout out and rush in. There are contrasts in Mark. Jesus isn’t rushing in, he’s leaving town. Bartimaeus shouts out but the crowds are ordering him to be quiet. Rather than entering town to bring death to the inhabitants, Jesus is leaving town and gives life, for as this man cries out, Jesus stops. “Jesus stood still and said, “Call him here.”

This is unexpected. A Jewish Rabbi would normally not mix with sinners, especially someone assumed condemned and judged by God, stricken blind and relegated to the ground like the, supposedly, lower creatures. This leads to the second thing.

A second thing that stands out for us involves philosophy and that ancient Greek, Plato shaping the way Western culture has developed. To see with your eyes is equated with understanding. Knowledge and seeing are viewed as equal. Plato called humans the “upward gazers” which elevated the assumption that what is up involves the spirit, and heaven itself was given an address somewhere “up there.” The downside is that the Earthly is condemned and assumed to be not virtuous. Physicality becomes shunned, and even Hell was given an address somewhere, “down there” because the Earth and what is below the Earth gets objectified and labeled as bad, or good only as a resource to be used, exploited in the quest to emphasize optics.

When he calls the man over, Jesus directly confronts this major cultural barrier to the reality of the Incarnation. Blindness, sitting by the roadside, begging. He’s excluded, shunned from society, marginalized, destitute. His blindness is not only viewed by many as punishment from God for sin, the result of his guilt, an indication of divine judgment against him as one condemned to darkness, but it’s also a literary critique on Plato’s philosophy and the failure of religion to bring everything together through the cohesive presence of God. Plato’s Greek philosophy is so strong that people live unexamined lives to this day; lives that buy in to a commodity culture where we love things more than people and the Earth is consumed by human use. Bartimaeus is discarded by the crowds, the mainstream of culture, cast aside even on the outskirts of a city that promises spiritual freedom and new life. Their religion has failed to remember its own core. This second aspect is subtle but powerful: the shaping of philosophy and the blind failures of those who claim to see yet practice a religion of hate doctrines that exclude. It’s by intention that Jesus is leaving Jericho.

There are many other things that stand out, and different approaches to read these passages would focus in other ways, but a third thing for us today involves that image of Bartimaeus the blind beggar sitting by the roadside shouting out his perception of “‘Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!’ Jesus stood still and said, ‘Call him here.’ And they called the blind man, saying to him, ‘Take heart; get up, he is calling you.’” This gets to our third thing: “So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus.” He throws off his cloak.

In Matthew 5:40 and also in Luke 6:29, Jesus teaches that if someone sues you in court and your shirt is taken from you, give them your coat too. If someone wants your coat, give them your tunic as well. These verses add insult to injury, and point to social-justice. It’s tough for people to be poor and excluded, and in giving their coat, their cloak, they give their only form of protection. A cloak is the home for a person who’s homeless, a cloak is something no one could take legally from vulnerable people. That he even needs a cloak isa judgment against the city, a society that does not care for all. This scene becomes non-violent active resistance. Here this man is throwing off his only protection, his only comfort in life, his only socially acceptable thing. He is giving his all to respond to true Mercy, to Jesus’ call to come. He responds to mercy with total trust, no fear, and archetypal connection as Jesus honors the dignity of this person’s humanity, as Jesus shows the inherent divinity of created beings by calling this man to himself as they claim inclusion, connection, and the goodness of physicality.

We claim to see but cover ourselves with cloaks all the time. We have cloaks that seek safety and security, cloaks that buy in to the ‘optics as virtue’ trap. We think our cloaks protect us, but they only encumber. As a church, we have a cloak that insists on institutional survival. As a nation, our highest value is focused on the economy, much of which is based on the business of war and building, selling, and using weapons, most of which kill from a distance in the name of homeland security. Of course, there’s also materialism and entertainment: they kill more slowly, from the inside. Most of our cloaks are shaped not by the freedom of God’s promises, but by cultural assumptions, unexamined thoughts presumed as reality, paradigms that wield power blindly, and practices that perpetuate disconnection and abuse of others even as we protect the rich and powerful in their positions of domination. A world without cloaks is unimaginable.

“Go, your faith has made you well.” Faith is trusting without seeing. Even as the man’s blindness is healed, it’s unseeing, faith, that is at work. He sheds the cloaks, not only a piece of cloth that protects him from the hot sun and cold nights, but he overcomes limitations of cultural assumptions, the spiritual blindness of organized religion, the political injustices of those in power, and the ignorant stupidity of a society that protect the wealthy, the elite class who seek to keep the poor in their place. He’s released from this, finds a new place in Christ, the author and perfector of our faith who defines Mercy and calls us to take heart. Those who trust without seeing, who welcome the challenging inner experience of spiritual transformation cannot ever see anything in the same way again. Following Jesus on the way is our invitation toward a journey of promise.

Three things, from biblical story and our place in it, to Plato’s philosophies and the struggle of our Western cultural context, to a deep call to trust our teacher who shows us how to see beyond limited vision as we throw off our cloaks to walk unencumbered on the journey of faith.

May God be with us, always, and glorified through Christ’s humble and sure mercy, now and forever, Amen.