



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

KELLY MOODY, DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN'S AND FAMILY MINISTRIES
THE TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, OCTOBER 28, 2018
JEREMIAH 31:7-9; PSALM 126; HEBREWS 7:23-28; MARK 10:46-52

IN GOD WE TRUST?

Mark 10:46-52 [*Jesus and his disciples came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "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." So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. Then Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" The blind man said to him, "My teacher, let me see again." Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.*]

Last week I listened to a podcast called *The Liturgists*. It's kind of an ongoing post-modern discussion about faith and spirituality set outside of traditional religious walls. Currently, the podcast is centered around these questions: Do you identify as a Christian? Why or why not?

According to a recent poll, more than 70 percent of Americans identify as Christian, but an overwhelming majority say that they don't feel comfortable speaking about faith most of the time. The reasons for their discomfort vary,

but generally, people don't speak about faith because it seems radical, overly politicized, and likely to incite conflict in a way they would prefer to avoid.

The Liturgists podcast has reflected on this question about Christianity with various guests, and last week, 3 of the hosts, all self-identified post-evangelical millennials, spoke with Catholic priest Richard Rohr about his experience of Christianity. Rohr explained that he identifies as Christian in part because of his experience of it as a faith that engages both the

head and the heart- an incarnational faith that creates internal freedom over time.

But William, a host who grew up in a black Pentecostal church, remarked that his Christian faith had promoted sly forms of oppression for him, not freedom. So, he wanted to know how one rebuilds trust after experiencing religious trauma and toxic belief systems under the banner of Christianity.

I felt the significance of what William was asking in my own way. I grew up in evangelical churches, where I learned that God loved us so much, God became human. But, I also absorbed malignant ideas about who I was as a woman, how God saw sin, and what I must do about it.

Without going into too much detail, let me simply say that I was sitting on the edge of my chair as I listened to William ask about toxic belief systems in American Christianity.

Though Rohr did not have an immediate answer, he seemed to recognize that the question was like a plumb line into the heart of the matter. He marveled at the connection William made between faith and trust, and the need to have concrete relationships in which trust can be practiced in order to fathom what it means to have faith in God.

And then, Rohr said, *“I do think we would be smart to stop using the word faith for about 20 years, and just use the word trust. Because faith carries this connotation of intellectual content-believing in these ideas. And there are a lot of people who believe a lot of ideas are true, but they can’t even trust the guy sitting next to them.”*

I’d never thought of incarnational faith that way before, but what Rohr said seemed both plausible and terrifying to me: the idea that trust in God can really only be lived out and practiced as trust among fellow human beings.

Today at the end of the gospel, we hear Jesus make a stunning declaration to Bartimeus: “your faith has made you well.” It is a provocative statement, and I want to unpack it with Rohr’s idea in mind: that the faith we speak of is better understood in post-modern America as *trust*.

We pick up the story today in the middle of a long walk for Jesus and his disciples on the way to worship in the temple in Jerusalem. Many of the people they met along the way encountered Jesus in ways that created inner freedom and transformed their lives.

Let’s recall a few. There was the Syrophonecian woman, whose faithful push-back helped Jesus reframe his ministry for all people, not just for Israel. There were the Pharisees, who asked Jesus tricky questions about the law and ended up being confounded by Jesus’s radical way of describing women as equals. There were the children, who Jesus honored as fully human even in their youth and vulnerability and lifted them up as examples for how to approach God.

That, too, was radical.

And then, there was the rich young ruler; that tragic, high-minded man who *desperately* wanted to prove his goodness, but did not want to trust in anything beyond his control.

Between each of these encounters, Jesus pulled his disciples aside and tried to explain that his path was not linear, that his was a process of

letting go and receiving new life, and that this was what he desired for them, too. They heard what he said, and maybe even believed it on some level, but it just wasn't sinking in.

And then, they met Bartimeus. Bartimeus was blind, we are told, but he could see what Jesus was about in a way that eluded the disciples. From the writing of the text we cannot discern how Bartimeus became blind. Maybe it was a disease, or a harsh punishment. It could it have been the result of some injustice in his community. We don't know. But we can assume that because of his blindness, Bartimeus was vulnerably dependent on his community, and that somehow, he recognized Jesus as someone who could have mercy on him in a radical way.

Now remember, the rich young ruler identified Jesus as "good, essentially perfect." He saw in Jesus something he was missing and wondered how to get that missing piece. So, he asked Jesus for something to *do*...another rule, maybe, or an intellectual idea to believe in. He was blind to the reality that he needed more than that- so instead of trusting Jesus, he went away sad that Jesus didn't have what he wanted.

But Bartimeus responded differently to Jesus. He threw off everything he had just to greet him. He asked for mercy. And after receiving it, he *immediately* followed joyfully on the way to Jerusalem. Bartimeus is like a mirror image of the young ruler, and he becomes an embodiment of that transformative Psalm of joy we sang a few moments ago: *When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, then we were like those who dream.....those who go out weeping,*

carrying the seed will return with joy, shouldering their sheaves.

As one who could not live without the support of his community, Bartimeus had been practicing trust for years before Jesus came walking by. He was fully aware of his blindness, and he took the risk to be seen by Jesus in order to experience mercy.

And what about us? If Jesus were to come walking by (or sitting beside us on the bus) here in post-modern America, would we trust him enough to let his words sink in? Or would we avoid his radical, overly-politicized way of inciting *conflict* within us?

I stand before you today mindful of the *news* of the week: the hateful massacre in a Jewish synagogue yesterday, the murders in Kentucky, attempts to mail pipe bombs to the most vocal critics of our President, and a memo instructing government agencies to redefine gender in binary categories, thereby blotting out the glorious diversity of transgender and non-binary identities. The world gives us many reasons to abdicate faith in God and one another; to throw up our hands and walk away sad. But there is another way.

Thousands of years later, we, too, learn to trust and to experience mercy here in our community. We practice the pattern of letting go and receiving new life in many ways here at Saint Mark's, but let's focus on three.

Every week in worship, we humbly open our hands to one another during the liturgy of the table, and receive what God has to give in a simple, eucharistic meal. It is a *profound act* of faith that we practice receiving from one

another each week as we celebrate the pattern of God's life in Jesus.

Another way we practice trust in God and mercy for one another is through stewardship. This is the time of year in which we talk a lot about money. We do that because *how we manage our money* **says something** about who we trust. Our spending habits reveal our blind spots and defense mechanisms. So it's a worthwhile spiritual practice to bring our budgets into the light of communal day, and explore them together. Because in doing so, we come to identify our lives with God's life and with one another. We learn to *let go* of our isolation and addiction to self-sufficiency. The secret is that our stewardship campaign is not really about balancing the budget, or following the rules, or proving our goodness to anyone. It is about trust in the God who gives freely to us, and who trusts us to bear God's generous image to the world. Next week, we will gather all of our pledges for the year to come in communal trust that what we have is abundant, and enough.

We also commit to transforming our minds together. Many of you are familiar with the Enneagram, the spiritual tool used for hundreds of years by spiritual directors to help Christians grow in faith. The idea is that each of us has a particular lens with which we see the world that imbues us with unique gifts and

defense mechanisms. Using the enneagram can help us become aware of our blind ways of reacting to each other and encourage us to *let go of our fixations* as we open ourselves to receive from God and one another in healthy, life-giving ways.

What Jesus said to those on the way to Jerusalem, he says to us: you bear the image and likeness of God. You are people *of faith*, practicing the pattern of letting go and receiving from God. You are building a community of trust that transforms lives, with God's help.

So don't be afraid.

Now more than ever, the risk to really be seen by God and each other is the risk we must take as people who identify with Jesus. Trust in God is lived out and practiced as trust among one another, and, as our inner freedom grows, we will become more equipped to create peace for others, even in post-modern America amidst toxic belief systems and religious trauma.

This is the faith that will make us well.

References:

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