

10-18-2020 SERMON CCI Casting Aside the Cloaks that Constrain Us Mark 10:46-52

Guest Speaker, Rev. Dr. Robert Reid

When I served as the interim pastor of a congregation in Tacoma more than two decades ago, a member asked if they could bring a dear friend to me for counsel. She was facing a life-changing question. The three of us sat in my living room and this woman told me that she had received a diagnosis of cancer. The doctors wanted to start her on a regimen of chemo-therapy and radiation treatment. They told her that the prognosis was good if she began treatment. Her friend brought her to me for spiritual counsel because she had grown up in the Christian Science church and was married to a faithful Christian Science man. This denomination teaches that sickness is an illusion that should be addressed by prayer alone. They accepted simple preventative medical help like dental and optical treatment, but believed the only intervention for serious medical problems should be prayer. Her parents were pillars of the church as was her husband. They would all shun her if she started receiving chemo and radiation. They told her that she would be making a mockery of her faith and the faith of their church if she trusted medicine rather than God.

“Pastor Reid,” she said, “I don’t know what to do. I don’t want to die. But I couldn’t live with myself if the only way I did survive was to turn my back on the beliefs of my husband, my parents, and my church. What should I do, Pastor Reid?”

I listened and made sure she understood that all other Christian traditions accepted medicine as part of God’s provision for humankind. I told her that she should find physicians who would pray with her even as they helped her with her treatments. But, she was paralyzed to the point of inaction for fear of the reaction of her church, her husband, and her family. If it was up to her alone, she would receive medical help; she wanted to live. I prayed with her. I told her that it was her choice. She was the one that must come to terms with what she could and could not live with. She should trust God with her decision, whether for or against, in prayer. When I asked the church member about the woman several weeks later, she just shook her head with sadness. I remember thinking that it was the first time I was sad that a person chose prayer.

For most of us, I fear we face such problems in an opposite manner. When faced with a challenge like this, is our first response to pray and ask God for wisdom regarding which choice to make. When the doctor presents the problem and asks us what we want to do, is our first response to say, “Let me pray about it.” Or do we really put our faith in God only after the fact and after all our own best efforts to face down a challenge. Whenever we face life-changing decisions, is our first impulse to turn to God in prayer or do our best first to get control of the situation. Jesus teaches that prayer is the essential dimension of our faith.

In the passage we heard read today, prayerful faith is at the heart of God’s response. This passage is the first of five episodes that are joined as a whole narrative meant to help believers gain a deeper understanding of the role faith and prayer should play in our lives. In these stories Jesus makes it quite clear what faith is **and what it is not**. Let’s take a look.

The text that Barbara read is the first episode in the triumphal entry narrative in the Gospel of Mark. Think of this narrative collection like a show you watch on TV that has a five-episode arc.

- The first episode introduces the main character and the subject at issue for all the episodes of the story. It begins with Jesus traveling from Galilee to Judea and entering the first city of Judea on the way to Jerusalem. Mark tells us that a blind man begging alongside the road hails Jesus with the same claim that will be made with his coming triumphal entry: “Son of David, have mercy on me!” Jesus calls him to step forward and heals him saying “Your faith has saved you.”
- The second episode is supposed to set up the action that focuses the story’s tension in a narrative arc. Here Jesus makes his triumphal entry and is fully hailed as Messiah, the Son of David. He goes all the way up to the Temple, the center of Jewish religious faith and looks around. Then he abruptly leaves to go back to Bethany for the evening. Narrative disequilibrium is created. We expected something to happen and are surprised. What are we to make of this?
- The third episode—usually the central episode of a narrative is where we expect the heart of the matter to be revealed—is meant to give the clue to the resolution of the matter. Here we are told that Jesus was hungry as he headed back to Jerusalem and his second visit to the Temple. He sees a fruitless fig tree in full bloom, but curses it when he gets a close view of it. It looked leafy green and good, but it hadn’t produced any fruit.
- The fourth episode of a five-episode narrative is where we should expect the drama to explode in a climactic confrontation. Mark delivers. He tells us that Jesus showed up at the Temple—the center of religious power and authority for Jews—and like an anarchist, he overthrows the moneychanger tables and denounces what the religious leaders let happen to God’s temple. “God’s House should be called a house of prayer for all nations, BUT you have made it into a den of robbers.” He throws the gauntlet down concerning the true exercise of faith for those who trust God. And before they can arrest him, he leaves for Bethany again.
- The fifth and final episode of this story arc resolves the original subject of what it means to practice true faith that was introduced in the healing of Bartimaeus episode. When they got up to go to Jerusalem on the third day the Disciples were shocked to see the fig tree, that had been in full bloom the day before, now just a withered stump. “Rabbi, look!” Peter tells Jesus, “The fig tree you cursed has withered!” You might think Jesus would explain why he cursed a perfectly fine tree, but he doesn’t. Instead, he explains something more important: How. He turns to his disciples and tells them to have faith that God will hear their requests just like God heard his request with regard to that tree. **“Have faith in God.”** “Truly I tell you,” and I am paraphrasing here, “A tree is nothing. If anyone says to this

mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and does not doubt in their heart, but believes that what they say will happen, it will be done for them." (22-25).

This collection of episodes that focus on what faith is and what it isn't has caused Christians no end of confusion: What's the deal with Jesus cursing a tree? That's not like him, is it? And what's the deal with promising that prayer can move a mountain? Do any of us believe that we could pray and have Mt. Rainer be physically removed to a different location? And it's even more complicated because Mark tells us, regardless of the green leaves, it wasn't the season for figs. So, did he just lose his cool over an unrealistic expectation? And talk about unrealistic, I think an editor for a modern publisher like Random House might suggest that before his book could go to press that a few rewrites are needed—especially with this whole mountain moving thing. Healing a blind man who has faith is one thing, but having enough faith to do something that everyone thinks is impossible—well that's something else. But Mark tells us that Jesus believed what he said; passionately. He offers this counsel as if it is the essence of true faith in God.

But what should not be missed is that the two stories of Jesus' temple visits. The first where he looked around in disgust and the second when he roared through the Temple precincts like a bull in china shop. We need to keep in mind that they are source of tension and climax regarding how we are supposed to think about what bad faith and the lack of prayer look like. This holiest of places for Judaism was meant to be a House of Prayer for all Nations—that's what the prophet Isaiah had said (Isa 56:7) and it's what Jesus says as well. He was incensed that the Temple leadership, the people who controlled the very practices of faith and prayer in the Temple, had sold the concession rights to the House of Prayer for all nations to merchants and marketers. There were tables everywhere, filled with caged doves and pigeons, corralled areas for sheep and oxen. There were other tables where wine, oil, or salt used in sacrifices were packaged for sale. And there were other tables currency exchange so people could pay the Temple tax in shekels. Banks had also purchased the right to set up shop in the Temple precincts because the Temple was the only place in Jerusalem where Romans permitted a Temple guard to preside over would be worshippers.

Make no mistake, when Jesus called for a pox on that fruitless fig tree on the way to Jerusalem, that was the same day he would ransack the merchant tables in the Temple, casting them aside and pronouncing a pox on all them. The Temple may have looked like it was a thriving enterprise, but prayer they had reduced prayer to commercialized ***act of faith rather than faith that comes to God in humility through prayer. What was meant to be a house of prayer for all nations had been turned it into a house of privilege for those who could pay the price.*** Jesus took up arms against the institutional, established state religion of Israel knowing that he was the one who would pay the price ***with his own life.*** But he could not abide that they had turned prayer—the essence of true faith in God—into profit-center and a way to keep the masses believing that this is what faith practice should look like. The fact that the fig tree was withered the following day was simply a witness to what would eventually happen to the Temple.

Once, Jesus came to the most glorious shrine to prayer the world has known, looking for a “house of prayer for all nations.” When he arrived, he found its sworn protectors had merchandized faith by controlling the concession stands that hawked prayer’s insidious displacement. At its core, the triumphal entry story is really about judgment more than faith. Jesus says to the fig tree, “May no one eat fruit from you again.” And we know that he is really pronouncing this judgement on the Temple. Forty years later a Roman soldier would slaughter a pig in the Holiest of Holies in order to demoralize all of Israel in its war against Rome. But the truth of the matter was, that Jesus believed Judaism had already desecrated the Temple when they had turned the court of prayer into a sacrilege that made a mockery of it.

When Jesus told his Disciples that faith in God was so powerful that it’s prayers could move a mountain, his followers knew that he was speaking of the promise made by Zechariah the Prophet. Jesus and his disciples were standing on the Mt of Olives, where Zechariah had prophesied that on the day of the Lord, *“The Mount of Olives [itself] shall be split in two from east to west by a very wide valley; so that one half of the Mount shall withdraw northward, and the other half southward.... Then the LORD [our] God will come, and all the holy ones with him.... And the LORD will become king over all the earth; on that day the LORD will be one and his name one.”* So, with a withered tree as his own testimony to the power of prayer, he promised that faith in God, and prayers lifted in God’s name will be vindicated. And not just in the final day of judgement, but whenever the faithful people of God take their stand in God’s will and pray for God’s purposes. That is what true faith should look like for those who truly believe.

Now here’s where the Blind Bartimaeus story can help us to understand what I believe may be the most important component of prayerful faith. The story is simple and familiar. It has the prayerful request: “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Jesus asks, “What do you want?” and he replies “To see again.” Jesus heals him as says: “Your faith has saved you.”

Forty years ago, I was teaching a lesson in an adult education class about the humility we needed to have when it comes to prayer and I chose this passage from Mark. I had been dabbling in pencil drawing and water color art at the time. I had seen an ink drawing of Bartimaeus that I liked. So, I produced my own version of it in watercolor. It hangs in our family room all these years later, with the art board yellowing with age. I tried to capture something of the humility of prayerful request. What makes the story remarkable is a small detail that we almost miss in the reading. When Jesus calls Bartimaeus at the very heart of this story the text says that he cast aside his beggar’s cloak and came. His blindness had reduced him to spending his life at the roadside begging for alms using a *himation* as the receptacle for the alms he might receive. The beggar’s *himation* doubled as their cloak, a covering on top of the tunic worn over the left shoulder and under the right. We are told that he cast it aside when he came to Jesus. He was still blind when he came to the Lord, but he already cast aside the one thing that defined his life as a beggar: his *himation*.

Jesus tells him that his faith has made him whole. What faith? The faith that casts aside the garment of his livelihood even before he is asked what his specific request might be. That’s

faith. Where other's might have gathered up their beggar's cloak even as they come to Jesus with their request (just in case), he leaves it in the dust. He's confident God will deliver him from any further need of its role. What does faith that believes God can move a mountain look like? Here it is. Embodied in blind Bartimaeus, who casts aside **the cloak that constrained him** & trusts God's mercy.

What God longs for more than anything is a people who will have faith. That is the story of the entire Old Testament and it is Jesus' story as well. But faith is more than a set of convictions. It is more than going to church, believing in Jesus and trying to be a good person. Faith takes risks. It throws its *himation* aside so that it stands without a net to fall back on. It tosses the tables in the temple even when it means that a death warrant will be the result. blind Bartimaeus persisted in the face of all the naysayers in his desire to experience God's mercy. When the moment came, he cast aside the cloak. Will we do the same? Can we dare let go of our backups, our just in case caution, and trust God with our lives?

Bartimaeus let go of the very thing that had defined his life, the one thing he had control of—his beggar's cloak and cast it aside when God came by. And this story begs the question what it is that we need to lay aside to let faith have its way in our life? Sometimes the stories of faith, like that of Bartimaeus are there to call each one of us back to the defining feature of faith: our prayer life. And sometimes the stories of faith call us to step into the issues of our culture and take a stand for God and making sure that the elite never get to control something or someplace that was meant to be for all people. So, whether we are asking for God's mercy or trying to move a mountain, the lever is the same in both instances: **Prayer**. And the Bartimaeus story calls us to one simple question. What is the cloak that is your security blanket that you have to cast aside in order to give yourself fully to God and to prayer? Where does God find figs on the branches? He finds them in the upturned hands that seek his wisdom and mercy. When the son of God returns will he find faith on earth? Will he find a people of prayer? Will he find that we have laid our cloaks aside?