

“Faith Can be a Great Motivator”

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman
at St. Andrew’s United Church, Sudbury
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READINGS: Job 42:1-5; Mark 10:46-52

In the 1970’s and 1980’s, there were few municipal politicians with a bigger shadow on the metropolitan Toronto political scene than Barbara Greene. Elected to the North York Board of Control in 1972, an unusual path to municipal activity since few 27 year old single women at that time would enter politics at the top of the political food chain. Election as a councillor or school trustee might be possible, but Barbara Greene had been elected to a role usually saved for experienced politicians, successful on the basis of her opposition to a municipal law that forbade single people from living together in a house or apartment unless they were related, or at least one was the owner of the property.

Greene went on to carry many issues, including demands for a more open government under then mayor Mel Lastman, and concern about individual rights.

As a Federal Conservative member from 1988 to 1993 she called on the government to end discrimination against people based on sexual orientation, and headed up a committee seeking better rights for women. She sought reforms to the immigration act for she thought some sections were discriminatory against disabled people.

She spoke for the rights of many in a career that ended with her defeat along with all but 2 Progressive Conservative members in the 1993 federal election.

Canada has lived through another federal election, and no doubt many (if not most) of the 200 brand new members elected Monday night have a story as to what called them to seek election to higher office, just like Barbara Greene had. Most politicians have some higher ethic that urges them into seeking election, for it is well known by those who have been in politics that there is no financial advantage to get into politics, despite what some of us might think.

I have not yet heard any stories as to what drove some of the new members to run, although I would suggest there are no better ethics than what Barbara Greene displayed: worrying about tenant rights, welcoming of disabled immigrants, and respecting people regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, or economic power. Why, Barbara even spoke about a gun registry for Canada, a position not popular with most of her fellow caucus members, for she saw the increasing gun violence in urban Canada that started over 30 years ago.

Unless someone is there to raise many of these issues, they can get lost, forgotten, even not make a dent on the consciousness of society.

What issues will our new members of parliament raise?

Now, you may ask, what does any of this have to do with today's readings? Bartimaeus was no politician, and was not heading to the polls to vote, but he did know how to speak up strategically and express what mattered to him.

As Jesus passes by he takes the opportunity to shout out and express what he needed. He needed to be healed. He needed to be treated as a human. He needed not to be ignored anymore. He needed to be seen as equal to everyone else.

It was no political event, as Jesus himself had no political aspirations, but Bartimaeus knew he had someone who was prepared to listen to him.

Most of us usually know where we can find someone to listen to us. In an ideal family it may be a father or mother or sibling, or maybe aunt or uncle or grandparent. Some of us may have a mentor or friend or former employer or teacher or coach to whom we turn for advice and guidance and inspiration. Having that kind of support is part of the essence of life.

Now when we are feeling on edge, and uncertain about what life is bringing to us, we may offer some views, and undertake actions, that seem extreme and even inappropriate.

Bartimaeus was desperate, and desperate people do desperate things. Bartimaeus yelled out because no one else seemed to care about his predicament and challenges. He needed someone to be his advocate, supporter, and friend. Yes, even healer, for healing and being a whole person are the same in English and in ancient languages. Bartimaeus needed to feel whole, and welcomed, and human.

And the truth is few of us are able to follow through for another once the yelling and upset dies down, for we can forget about others' needs once they are silent, as then we focus on the struggle to meet our own needs.

The Jesus example was to take time and not ignore real pain, real issues, that make a real risk to the wholeness of others.

In 1973 John Darley and Daniel Batson, two Princeton University psychologists, conducted an experiment inspired by the Good Samaritan story in the Bible.

They gathered two groups of students who were attending the Princeton Theological Seminary, one of the foremost theological schools in the United States. One group was to prepare a talk on the employment opportunities for divinity students after graduation, and the other group

was to prepare a talk on the parable of the Good Samaritan. They were informed that after they prepared the talk, they would need to go across part of the campus to another building to present the talk.

Some were told they were rushed, and needed to move quickly when they left; others were told they had lots of time, and need not hurry.

In the courtyard was an individual who clearly looked like he had been attacked, injured and lying there beside the pathway, needing help. It was a real-life “Good Samaritan” moment.

Of those who were told they were running late and needed to hurry, only 10% stopped to help the individual, even those who were rushing to present a talk on the Good Samaritan story itself; about 63% of those who were told they had lots of time stopped to attend to the person in the courtyard.

Now we can take a lot of insights from the story and research. Jesus’ parable is right – religiously trained people have no time to help others. That may be an insight, though as one of those people I sure hope not. Or the lesson may be it is hard to act on our beliefs when confronted with a difficult situation. That conclusion also could be true.

But it seems since time was such a defining part of the experiment, it may be true that we have allowed time, the shortness of time, the pressures of time, the demands of time, to so control our lives that we have lost what is ultimately important to us.

In the rush of our modern life, have we made deadlines and time crunches the focus of who we are? Have we lost sight of doing what is right at the expense of doing whatever we do as fast as possible?

Today is the fourth Sunday of our Stewardship focus, and we are invited to make a commitment to how we will support the church. That has a financial component, but it also has a faith component – what we give reflects what we believe, and what is important to us.

It is only when we are clear as to what is important that we can make clear decisions in life. Bartimaeus knew what was important – a sense of justice and wholeness for himself and for all. The Good Samaritan knew what was important – concern for our neighbour. And at least 63% of the divinity students confronted with a person in need knew what was important. It was not making a special class presentation but, instead, helping a person in need.

May we see the signs and needs around us, and be willing to respond in faith, as we live our Christian calling this day and every day.