

Healing Love

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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by Rev. Dave Le Grand

It was a busy day. It is a signature of Mark's storytelling, showing how Jesus is busy. Earlier in the chapter, a rich man comes up to Jesus and asks how he can inherit eternal life.

Jesus asks, and I paraphrase, "Are you following the commandments?"

Yes.

"Well, you have to do one more thing for me." This is a big ask. "Sell all you own and follow me." The man cannot do it. His *stuff* is too important to him.

Along comes the story of James and John in this chapter of Mark. Those sons of Zebedee, following Jesus, but they don't seem to be listening very well; they seem to have decided that discipleship comes with the fringe benefit of glory. Jesus must be ready for a vacation by now.

Mark then tells us that Jesus encounters Bartimaeus, his name – Bar – son of ... Timaeus; Bar Timaeus. Bartimaeus is tolerated but certainly not loved in the community. Storyteller Mark makes it clear that he is not loved by people around him. In Judaism, compassion and love is at the foundation of faith, especially for the most vulnerable. We don't see much compassion for Bartimaeus; passers by probably wish the Jewish leaders or Rome.

"Someone should deal with panhandlers! Put that man in a home or somewhere safe, where we aren't harassed." Seeing poverty, vulnerability, frailty splayed out on that cloak, it wears down the compassion of religious faith.

Along comes Jesus, and like being shocked to life, Bartimaeus senses something – he yells. He yells like his life depends on it. Somehow, he knows that this man passing by is special, the Son of David.

Those annoyed passers by rebuke him, "Come on man! Leave Jesus alone."

Jesus hears the plea and seeks out where that voice is coming from. Jesus bends down and asks, "What do you want from me?"

During my training many years ago was a practical experience. I was a student chaplain at a nursing home. Leading worship for a diverse group of elders was very new to me, and quite intimidating, to be honest. I was trying to connect, especially challenging was trying to connect with people who were experiencing dementia.

I don't remember the woman's name, I'll call her Trudy, she had the loudest voice I had ever heard. Her eyes were closed but she was definitely not asleep. As time passed – and while I earnestly prayed and talked – Trudy became more agitated, eventually yelling at top volume: "God help me!"

Over and over – "God help me! God help me!"

I paused worship, consulted a staff member, “Is she ok?” I was assured that all was good. So it felt rather miraculous when the musician began playing “How Great Thou Art” on the keyboard, and singing began. I heard above all, the beautiful singing Trudy’s alto voice, bringing harmony to this moment.

It was a humbling experience for me early in ministry, to know that there are limits to my ability to reach people. But there is something Holy happening around me, around all of us, that connects, doing healing work. For Trudy, it was music that resonated with her heart, and got her singing. How healing happens, I will leave to your differing opinions. For me, healing very real, but very mysterious.

Let me be clear, I don’t understand healing as *only physical*. At the heart of so many biblical healing stories there is something deeper happening – for the leper, the woman who has been bleeding for years, the demon-possessed person (likely code for a profound mental health challenge). The worst ailment for all of these, and so many around us today, is loneliness, a sense of isolation, of feeling invisible. Worse, is the experience of someone who feels that people see them as less-than-human.

The big “healing”, then, is that they are reconnected, welcomed back into community from places of isolation. I think that sometimes we feel that way – lonely, isolated, invisible. Think for a moment about a time you felt isolated, lonely. Was there a special person who called at just the right moment, or you experienced a kind gesture that made you feel connected?

Remember my reference to Mark’s story of Jesus and the rich man only verses before today’s story? The man could not let go of his possessions. He was forlorn. His ailment continued. In contrast, Bar Timaeus, throws off his coat and runs to Jesus. Among the poorest of the community, that coat was probably among his most precious possessions.

Bar Timaeus let go, clearly a victory in Mark’s storytelling. Being rich is not at all a problem in itself, but the rich man followed all the religious rules. The man lacked the faith to let go of his stuff.

Healing is about letting go of control, of being in the moment. Healing is about love. Jesus asks Bar Timaeus – *What do you want me to do for you?* He didn’t presume what this man wanted. He listened. What a great reminder for us, to listen, when someone is hurting.

We want to fix things: fix broken relationships; fix a friend’s dilemma; we expect government to fix complicated problems like eradicating poverty, addictions, insufficient affordable housing. While the government is at it, we expect the government to fix to the health care system.

Healing takes time. Healing takes paying attention to the voices of vulnerability.

Two women, both seriously ill, found themselves together in a hospital room.¹ The one woman would sit up for an hour each day, and look out the only window in room. The other woman had to lay on her back all day, couldn’t move. They got along very well, talking about family, jobs. Every afternoon when looking out the window, the neighbour would describe what she saw.

¹ The Man by the Window by Harry Buschman

The woman in the other bed lived for that hour each day, hearing about the colours, the ducks and swans in the water, children playing in the park. The woman sitting by the window could describe things in exquisite detail, while the other would close her eyes and imagine.

Weeks passed, and one morning the nurses came in to find that the woman by the window had quietly passed away. Sadly, the neighbour quietly said a prayer and good-bye to her special friend.

“Would you like us to move you to beside the window?” Asked the nurse.

The move was made. One day, slowly, painfully, the patient propped herself up on one elbow to take his first look at the real world outside. Slowly she turned to look out the window beside the bed. It was a blank wall! She asked the nurse what her neighbour in the room was thinking, describing all these wonderful imaginary things.

The nurse responded, “Your neighbour was blind. Perhaps she knew that you loved the picture she painted.”

Being part of the solution – healing starts by put our first foot forward with a step with love, not judgment or presumption. Amen.