

“Take Heart, Get Up, He is Calling You”
Sermon preached by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA
October 25, 2009

Hebrews 7:23-28, Mark 10:46-52

Our first lectionary reading today comes from the letter to the Hebrews, which is not so much a letter as it is an early Christian sermon, preached by a pastor to a congregation in need of encouragement. In the part of the sermon we are about to hear, the preacher continues in vein describing how Jesus is a high priest, the chief mediator between God and human beings. He says that Jesus holds this role in perpetuity. He holds it forever. Because of his resurrection, Jesus is forever living and interceding on behalf of those who approach God through him. Listen for the book of Hebrews’ high view of Jesus as the perfect, sinless son of God, who offered himself as a sacrifice for the world. And whatever your own view of Jesus, think about how looking at Jesus in that way might give you comfort and strength. Think about how having a mediator like that standing up for you would be encouraging. *Read Hebrews here.*

Our second lesson is a little easier to comprehend and apply. It comes from the end of the tenth chapter of the Gospel of Mark. The story I’m about to read about the healing of the blind man Bartimaeus immediately precedes Mark’s account of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. And it is the conclusion of a section of Mark’s gospel which begins with the healing of another blind man. The section continues with story after story depicting the spiritual blindness of the disciples and others whose physical eyesight is just fine, but who just couldn’t seem to see our grasp what Jesus is really all about. For instance, Peter acknowledges that Jesus is the Messiah, but then rebukes Jesus for saying that the Messiah must suffer.

The disciples forget to use the power of prayer when faced with a young boy in need of healing; they argue on the road about which of them is the greatest; and then they try to prevent someone who is doing good in Jesus name from doing healing work because he is not following them. They try to prevent little children from coming to Jesus. When a rich man comes to him trying to find out how to inherit eternal life, and goes away sad when Jesus, loving him, says, “*If you want to really live, give everything away and come follow me,*” Peter shows that he has misunderstood Jesus by saying, “Okay, we’ve done that. What do we get?” And then, right before the story of Bartimaeus, James and John jockey for seats of honor at Jesus’ right and left in his glory, and Jesus has to pull of the disciples aside and tell them, “Hey, following me is about service.”

Now Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, heading out of Jericho on a road heading west¹ toward the city where he will be crucified in a matter of days. There he encounters a blind man sitting beside the road, who having heard that Jesus of Nazareth was passing by, begins crying out. Notice as you hear the text how people, at first, try to shush the blind man, but he keeps asking for mercy. Watch how Jesus responds to Bartimaeus. Listen to what the people Jesus sends to Bartimaeus say to the blind man. And pay attention to how Bartimaeus reacts and what Jesus says and does then, and how Bartimaeus responds to that. *Read Mark here.*

The other day I ran across a blog post written by a man whose wife's eyesight has deteriorated to the point that she has become totally blind.² In it, he lamented the fact that many places in society don't take the needs of the blind into account. He singled out grocery stores and department stores for particular blame. He says that every so often they move things around in a store so that it appears like it is a brand new establishment. They move whole aisles from one section of the store to another. They move something that has always been on one aisle to another aisle. They put displays in the wider aisles in the store, without regard to the fact that a blind person will not be aware that they are there. And sometimes a store employee will respond to a question about the location of a particular item in the store by pointing and saying, "It is over there." The man, irritated that the blind seem to be invisible to so many in society, titled his post, "Just because you can't see them, doesn't mean they can't see you." Now, if that doesn't make sense to you at first glance, what he's saying is, "Just because you don't notice the blind, doesn't mean they don't notice how you are treating them."

To be literally, physically blind is no easy row to hoe, particularly if you have at one time been sighted. Some people in our congregation know that frustration first-hand. Often it comes gradually. Objects in your view become more and more fuzzy, less and less distinct. Your eyesight grows ever dimmer due to untreated cataracts or macular degeneration or some other disease of the eye. Sometimes blindness comes on all at once. An optic nerve is damaged, a retina is torn, a blood clot forms, or something blows up in your face. And you can't see anymore. Whether the physical blindness comes on gradually or immediately, you find yourself relating all too well to the lady who has trouble navigating store aisles. Physical blindness is no picnic.

One way to understand the healing of Bartimaeus in today's text is to focus on physical blindness. But I don't think that's really what the story is finally all about. I think it is talking about a different kind of blindness: a blindness that is no less insidious or problematic than physically not being able to see. The passage is finally about spiritual blindness: the spiritual blindness of the disciples, the spiritual blindness that plagues each and every one of us and the people we know both inside and outside of our community of faith.

Spiritual blindness is always an "I" disease, with a capital I. It comes on us when we can't see a way out and we can't glimpse any hope. It comes on us when we get so wrapped up in our grief that it obscures our ability to see that even though our life will never again be the same, our life will nevertheless go on. It comes on us when we get so knotted up in worry and anxiety that we can't see possibility, so blinded by anger or resentment that we can't see our way forward to reconciliation and peace. It comes on us when we get so caught up in the status quo that we can't see the need for change, so full of animosity that we can't see our way clear to love. It comes on us when we get so wrapped up in our own agendas and our own needs that we can't see anything beyond our own noses and our own plans.

It is a spiritual blindness that comes on all of us. No one is immune from that sort of blindness. It afflicts us all from time to time and to a greater or lesser extent. But it is no way to live. When you are spiritually blind, you bump into things like a bull in a china shop. You step all over other people's feelings. You fall into holes of despair. You fail to perceive other's needs. You miss signs of God's kingdom and opportunities to live into God's love again and again because you are so wrapped up in your "I" disease.

Now the text we are looking at today is, at first glance, about physical blindness, but on a deeper level it is about spiritual blindness and how we deal with it. That is why Mark includes it in his gospel. Watch it unfold. The first thing that happens is that Bartimaeus voices his need. People try to shush him, but he keeps crying out, “Son of David, Son of David, have mercy on me. Have mercy on me.”

The anthem that the Men’s Chorus sang this morning, from that old Fanny Crosby hymn, “Pass Me Not, O Gentle Savior” is an anthem based on this particular text. Fanny Crosby, as you may know, was blind. When she wrote this hymn, she was thinking about Mark 10:46-52. She knew all about what it meant to be physically blind, but when she wrote it she was thinking about spiritual blindness. “Pass me not, O gentle Savior. Hear my humble cry. While on others Thou art calling, do not pass me by.”

So Jesus stops, and he sees and hears Bartimaeus, and then he sends some people over to him. This morning, I want for us to think together for a little while about what those people say to Bartimaeus. I want us to hear those words addressed to us, in our episodes of spiritual blindness. But I also want us to hear those words as words that we might use to help others in their spiritual blindness.

The first thing that the people who go over to Bartimaeus say is, “Take heart.” Now, I have to say at first glance, I thought, “That’s not exactly what I would want to hear if I were blind or in need or in pain. That sounds like the “singing songs to a heavy heart” that pastoral care books warn against. If I were hurting, I wouldn’t want somebody to come up to me and say, “Take heart.” But then I thought to myself, “Why are they saying, ‘Take heart’, to Bartimaeus?” What are they trying to communicate to Bartimaeus. They are trying to say, “Jesus has heard you. God has seen you. Take heart.”

There are all kinds of ways we can communicate that “take heart” message. As somebody pointed out to me after the first service, a lot of it is in how you say something like “take heart”. Do you say, “Take heart, Mark.” Or do you say, “Take heart. God is with you and I am here. I will listen. Tell me about it.”

In the Bantu languages, the word for hello literally means “I see you.” In Swahili you would say, *Waonaje*. In isiZulu you would say *Sawubona*. That’s the way you say, “Hello.” The response in Zulu is *Sikhona*. “I am here.”³

I think of the importance of letting people know in the midst of their pain that you see them, that you hear them, and that you honor their circumstances. A lot of times it is just about listening, being there, communicating with or without words, “I see you. God sees you.” This is the best way to help people take heart.

One of my mentors in preaching is a man named Fred Craddock. He is a wonderful preacher and story teller. Fred talks about the task of preaching by saying that no one can be an effective preacher without having an *empathetic imagination*. No one can be effective at preaching without being able to see and know his or her people, because otherwise you will be hurling words at strangers.

Listen to what he says about the task of being a pastor or a preacher, and think about it not just in terms of how pastors preach, but how Christian people, people who are trying to follow Jesus, live. So just substitute follower of Jesus for pastor or preacher when you hear it in this brief quote.

When the pastor preaches, he doesn't sell patent medicine; he writes prescriptions. Others may hurl epithets at the "wealthy," but the pastor knows a guilt-ridden man confused by the Bible's debate with itself over prosperity: Is wealth a sign of God's favor or disfavor? Others may display knowledge of "poverty programs, "but the pastor knows what a bitter thing it is to be somebody's Christmas project. He sees a boy resisting his mother's insistence that he wear the nice sweater that came in the charity basket. He can see the boy wear it until out of mother's sight, but not at school, out of fear that he may meet the original owner on the playground. There are conditions worse than being cold.

Others may discuss "the problem of geriatrics" but the pastor has just come from the local nursing home and he still sees worn checkerboards, faded bouquets, large-print King James Bibles, stainless steel trays and dim eyes staring at an empty parking lot reserved for visitors. Others may analyze the "problem with youth today," but the pastor sees a fuzzy-lipped boy, awkward, noisy, wishing he were absent, not a man, not a child, preoccupied with ideas that contradict his fourteen years' severe judgment against the girls.⁴

We have to be able to really see people. Part of what helps others take heart, and part of what helps us take heart, is that they and we have been seen.

The next thing that the people who go over to Bartimaeus say is "Get up!" After they say "Take heart," they say, "Get up!" And again, the inflection is really important. Is it a stern "Get up." Or is it an encouraging, "Get up! He's seen you. He's heard you. Get up!" The difference in intonation makes all the difference in the world.

Someone in the congregation shared with me the story of a friend of his named Stephen Cochran. Stephen Cochran is a Marine veteran who was in Afghanistan when an IED blew up on him. There was damage to his back and legs, and he was rendered paralyzed, unable to walk. For nine months he dealt with the news that he would never walk again. Then the VA hospital in Nashville stepped in and said, "Get up!"

Now, not everyone is fortunate enough to have an injury that can be responded to in the way the VA responded to his injury. But thanks to the surgery they performed, Cochran was able to walk again, and he was able to pursue his childhood dream, which was to be a country music singer. If you are a country music fan, listen for Stephen Cochran's music. He's truly an inspiration.⁵

You might be saying, "Okay, that's fine. Stephen Cochran was able to get up and walk, but not everybody has that sort of opportunity." So let me tell you about someone whose story I recently had the privilege to see and hear. His name is Nick Vujicic. He is from Australia. Nick was born with no arms and no legs. And he goes around and gives motivational speeches to different groups, from schools to corporations, and when he speaks, he talks about how, even with no arms and legs, he is able to have joy

in life. Part of what brings him this joy is providing testimony to how God has been with him in the midst of less than ideal circumstances.

On the video I watched, Vujicic is sitting on a table and addressing a group of high schoolers and at a certain point he says, “Sometimes in life, you fall down, like this.” And then he let himself slowly fall over until he is totally prone on the desk, flat, face down on the table, and from that position, he lifts his head to look at the crowd and says, “So what do you do when you fall down? You get back up. Everybody knows you get back up, otherwise you can’t walk, and you can’t get around. There are some times in life when you fall down, and you feel like you don’t have the strength to get back up. Do you have hope? Because I’ll tell you, I’m down here, face down, and I have no arms and legs. It should be impossible for me to get back up, but it is not. You see, I will try one hundred times to get back up, and if I fail one hundred times, if I fail and I give up, do you think that I’m ever going to get up? No! But if I fail and I try again and again and again, eventually I will. I want you to know that it is not the end. It matters how you are going to finish. Are you going to finish strong? And if you do, you’ll have the strength to get back up, like this.”⁶

Watch the video, friends. He goes from a prone position, to somehow pulling himself back up until he’s sitting up straight again, vertical. He continues his speech, and as the camera pans the crowd, you see tears on the faces of the young people watching and listening to him. “Get up.”

The last thing the people Jesus sends to Bartimaeus tell him is, “He is calling you.” I want to point out the order on that. It is not, “He is calling you, take heart, get up.” It is not, “He is calling you, get up, take heart.” It is “Take heart, get up, he is calling you.”

People who have tried to convert me, to make me a Christian, even since I’ve been ordained as a pastor, have often approached me by saying, “He is calling you.” I want to say, “I know that. Why do you think I went to seminary? Why do you think I’ve served churches for eighteen years? I know that.” They approach me by saying, “He is calling you” without any sort of understanding of what my story is. I don’t get the sense that they are saying, “I see you. I see your joy. I see your pain.”

The order is very different in the story of Bartimaeus. It is “Take heart, I see you, God sees you, and only then, he is calling you.” To what is he calling you? He is calling you to a relationship with the God of love, embodied in Jesus. He is calling you to a relationship with people who can embody love for you, whether it is at church or with some other group of people on the road to spiritual growth. He is calling you into community. The best recipe for dealing with spiritual blindness is being with other people who are trying to overcome it as well, being with other people who are taking heart and getting up.

In your bulletin you should have a little yellow strip of paper that says, “Take heart, get up, he is calling you.” That strip of paper has space for three names. I don’t want you to give that yellow sheet of paper to me or turn it in to the church office. I want you to think about three people you know who need to know that they are seen, who need to hear “Get up,” and who might just benefit from the message, “He is calling you into community.”

There are other people who can help you with your burdens.” What I want you to do is to write down three names and take that yellow strip of paper and tuck it in your wallet, put it in your purse, and pray for those three people. What you do with it beyond that, that’s up to you. I wonder where the road will lead you.

In Jesus’ name.

Amen.

Aaron D. Fulp-Eickstaedt

¹ In the oral version of the sermon, I actually said heading east. Jericho is east of Jerusalem, so of course, they would have been heading west. My directional confusion explains why I so easily get turned around while driving....

² You can read the blogpost on the American Foundation for the Blind website here: http://afb.org/message_board_replies.asp?TopicID=3281&FolderID=3

³ The initial insight on this came from Cathy Ward. I checked the Swahili out with Jeff Panitt. A Google Search of Sawubona will yield a host of links. Here is just one: <http://tomlaforce.com/sawubona/>

⁴ Fred Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, 4th ed. (Atlanta: Chalice Press, 2001), p. 67.

⁵ You can read more about Stephen Cochran’s story here <http://www.livedaily.com/news/15496.html> or see a video about him from The American Veteran here <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Stephen-Cochran/158162316766#/video/video.php?v=1238082786722>

⁶ You can see the video about Nick Vujicic here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qSAXYNIasxk&feature=related> and here <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v4uG2kSdd-4>