Sunday, March 20, 1988
THE HEALING OF A BLIND BEGGAR
Mark 10:46-52

Text: Mark 10:46-52
"And they came to Jericho. And as he was leaving Jericho with his disciples and a great crowd, Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, the son of Timaeus, was sitting by the roadside. And when he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out and say, 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!' And many rebuked him, telling him to be silent. But he cried out all the more, 'Son of David, have mercy on me!' And Jesus stopped and said, 'Call him.' And they called the blind man, saying to him, 'Take heart. Get up; he is calling you.' And throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. And Jesus said to him, 'What do you want me to do for you?' And the blind man said to him, 'Rabbi, let me recover my sight.' And Jesus said to him, 'Go your way; your faith has made you well.' And immediately he recovered his sight and followed him on the way."

The stories of Jesus healing people in the New Testament are many and varied. During this season of Lent, we have been examining some of them in an attempt to discover what they have to say to us in our time. This morning, before we look at another one of these stories, I want to make a few comments about the overall healing ministry of Jesus.

The first comment is this: Jesus demonstrated more interest in the physical and mental health of women and men than any other religious leader in history. Although his ministry consisted of preaching and teaching, his healing ministry was so important that almost one-fifth of the Gospel stories are devoted to his healing of individuals.

This healing ministry was a practical application of his teaching, for what better way is there to show God's love than to cure physical and emotional ills? Jesus believed and taught that God desires good health for us all. It is never God's will that we should be sick in any way.

This leads to a second comment. Jesus did not teach or imply that illness, disease, or physical or mental handicaps or disabilities of any kind were direct punishment from God, although there were people in his time who believed that they were, just as some people still believe that today.

At the same time, Jesus also knew, as we know, that illness or disease may be the result of our own bad habits or wrong choices, or the bad habits or wrong choices of others. For example, we now know that smoking can and often does lead to lung cancer and other ailments. Thus, if we persist in the habit, we shouldn't be surprised if one day we get lung cancer or some other lung disease, or heart failure. Or if I'm a careless and reckless driver, or drive while under the influence of alcohol, my chances of having an accident that may cripple me or kill me, or kill or cripple others, are increased. But then I shouldn't blame God for causing the accident or giving me cancer.

A third comment. I believe that Jesus knew, as we know today, that our own guilt feelings, our unwillingness to forgive others and to forgive ourselves, and our unwillingness to accept God's forgiveness can at times hinder the healing process within us.

Now we know more and more that the body's defenses against disease, that our immune system is directly affected by the emotions and by our overall attitude. In fact, much of our

recovery from various diseases depends upon the mobilization of mechanisms that already exist within us for resisting and overcoming disease, both mental and physical. We all have healing powers within us ready to go to work. One physician put it this way: “There is a force, the mechanics of which we do not fully understand, that seems to operate routinely in most people to protect and foster their mental health even under the most adverse conditions. In a similar way, there is a force that protects and encourages physical health even under the most adverse conditions.”

Many times, however, something from the outside needs to help set these forces in motion again. Guilt, our own reluctance to want to get well, hate, fear, and other such things can hinder the healing power. Dr. Bernie Siegel, in his book Love, Medicine, and Miracles, writes, “The fundamental problem most patients face is an inability to love themselves, having been unloved by others during some crucial part of their lives. This period is almost always childhood, when our relations with our parents establish our characteristic ways of reacting to stress.”

Oftentimes a caring, loving person or persons can be the trigger that sets these healing forces that are within us to work again. As I noted last week, sometimes we need others to carry us to a healing source.

With these comments in mind, let’s turn now to this healing story from the Gospel of Mark.

We should first notice that the man who is the center of the story is described as a “blind beggar.” That’s a revealing combination. He has a physical ailment — he wants his sight back — but he is also a beggar. What is the relationship between his blindness and his status as a beggar?

Perhaps because of his blindness, he could not get a job and had ended up as a beggar. Or maybe because he was poor and never had access to nutritious food or health care, he became blind. The cause-and-effect relationship between the man’s vocation as a beggar and his blindness is difficult to determine. It may be enough simply to note that physical ailments often accompany poverty and powerlessness.

Note secondly that the overall environment of the blind beggar is a larger factor in the story than we may at first recognize.

The story does not simply concern the blind beggar and Jesus. There is a third factor: “A multitude of people.” There is a crowd along the road trying to get near Jesus. There is public opinion. There is peer pressure.

What did “the multitude of people” do? When Bartimaeus, the blind beggar, heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth coming along the road leading out of Jericho, he began to cry out, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.” But many of the people told him to be quiet, to shut up.

But why would they want to silence this blind beggar? In the insistent cries of Bartimaeus, we can hear a man saying over and over to himself, “Here’s my chance, my chance of a lifetime.”

The rebuke from the crowd is a sample of what crowds often do or try to do throughout history to all those who make a clamor about need and suffering. We in the crowd like to say, “Stay down and keep quiet.” The crowd was saying, “Don’t bother Jesus and don’t bother us.” They didn’t think this blind beggar had any claim on Jesus or anyone else. He was poor and blind,

and he was supposed to stay that way. He didn't deserve any better. Keep the blind beggar silent and in his place. Maintain the status quo. In a similar way, in every society, powerful institutions, churches, schools, courts, and crowds frequently serve to keep people in their designated slots.

To the massive ignorance of the crowd, such things as poverty and affliction had nothing to do with Jesus. Suffering and poverty are not his business. Let the church stick to religion and keep out of economic and health questions. That's what the crowd thought. We who are in the crowd try to keep so many things away from Jesus.

The blind beggar, on the other hand, turns out to know more, trust more, and ask more than the people expected from someone who was both poor and blind. He asks that the power of the powerful one (Jesus) be given to one who has no claim except the courage to cry out.

Jesus listened to the blind beggar and not to the crowd. He stopped and said, "Call him." Jesus stopped and gave the whole of his attention to a blind beggar. The crowd couldn't believe it. His stopping and his attention said clearly, "You count. You are important. You can be rid of your blindness and your begging."

Jesus treated disabled people in a different way than we often respond to them. We frequently hesitate. We're not quite sure how to react. We may not be as outwardly rude as the crowd that day so that we say, "Sit down and shut up," or "Keep away." But we sometimes hesitate because we are afraid.

Our first fear is that somehow this disability of the other individual is catching. It might actually infect me. As soon as I say this in words, I recognize how foolish the concept is, but the fear, usually unconscious in me, is actually present. Don't we sometimes say to ourselves or even out loud, "There but for the grace of God go I"?

A second fear is related to the first; this unknown thing out there attached to this person or causing a problem for this person is somehow threatening to me in ways that are unclear. I do not understand rationally how the threat exists; I only know that I am afraid. The person with the obvious physical handicap represents the unknown, the different, and I am a little scared of the unknown and the different.

A third fear is more agonizing because it represents something that is actually in me; it symbolizes my own weakness and my own inability. It makes me cry out in recognition of my own handicaps and my own shortcomings, and we don't like to be reminded that we have them.

I recently read about a man who had to have one hand amputated. One day, some years later, he expressed to his religious leader his desire to enter the ministry. The minister responded, "You can't possibly do the jobs that the ministry requires, and I will not recommend you for this." Looking back on that sharp, "You can't," from this minister, the man who had lost a hand said it took him years to understand that an unconscious process was involved. The religious leader, quite inept and bungling in his job, unconsciously was saying, "Since I find it difficult to do ministry with both hands, how can this individual do it with only one?"

Jesus, however, saw the blind man as he sees all of us, as being whole, even before he was healed. He stopped and said to the crowd, "Call the blind beggar and bring him to me." When

the crowd delivered this invitation, the blind beggar was so excited that “throwing off his mantle, he sprang up and came to Jesus.”

Jesus said to him, “What do you want me to do?” And the blind beggar said, “Let me receive my sight.” And Jesus said to him, “Go your way; your faith has made you well.” And immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus on the way. The beggar became a disciple.

The meaning of this healing story can be summarized this way:

The man’s illness reflects a powerlessness in society that leads to economic disadvantage — he is a blind beggar.
The community wishes to perpetuate the man’s powerlessness by forcing him to be silent — by keeping him away from Jesus.
Hope leads the man to speak out. He will not be silent no matter what the crowd says.
It is the availability of Jesus as a committed partner in dialogue that permits healing to take place.
What does this have to do with us today in the church?

Frequently, the first step in healing and in gaining power for someone like the blind beggar is bringing things to speech. The key turning point in this story is when the blind beggar is able to speak of his pain. And rather than being silenced by the crowd, he continues to cry out in hope.

Secondly, we need to remember that healing and wholeness are more than various individuals claiming their wholeness. Our crowd, our society, needs healing as well. The people in the crowd that day around Jesus needed to see that they were trying to prevent the blind beggar from being healed. When he continued to cry out until he was heard and was allowed to get to Jesus, his healing also began their healing.

These healing stories are for all of us. They call us to the wholeness that is God’s will for us. We are meant to live in an inclusive society without the artificial barriers we like to set up. Amen.