Sunday, October 27, 1991
THE REWARDS OF PERSISTENCE
Mark 10:46-52

I've always admired persistent people — those who have a worthwhile goal and keep trying, often against strong opposition or difficult circumstances. The other day, I read a story about a man named Walter Harter. He was an average person with a slight limp who grew up in a farming community. Denied the opportunity for a college education due to his family's financial circumstances, he set his heart on working in New York City.

He went to the local library and consulted the New York City telephone directory. He looked up the listings of various stores there and decided to concentrate on a well-known chain that had 393 stores in the New York City metropolitan area. He decided to write each of them a personal letter asking for a position. He wrote fifteen handwritten letters a day and kept at it day after day. There was no reply.

Finally, after writing all 393 stores with no response, he scraped together enough money for a trip to New York City. The first store he visited was a large one near Times Square. After listening to his story, the manager said to him that even if they had received his letter, they would have sent it on to the Personnel Department of the chain.

Walter didn't know what a Personnel Department was, but he followed the manager's directions to a large building on Park Avenue. There, he was taken to a stern-faced man sitting behind a large desk. The man seemed to be in charge of everything. After telling his story once more, Walter waited as the man behind the desk stared at him for what seemed like the longest time. Then the man smiled and stood up. He pointed to a table holding stacks of letters. "Your applications are here," he said, "all 393 of them. We knew that someday you would walk in here. So we have a clerk's job waiting for you. You can start this afternoon."

When I read that story, I thought of Bartimaeus, the blind beggar who kept shouting from the crowd until Jesus heard him. "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me." People in the crowd did their best to silence him, but he wouldn't give up. He refused to be defeated by his circumstances. He kept shouting, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me," until Jesus stopped walking and said, "Call that man here."

Now, some of the people in the crowd changed their tune — they said, "Take heart, get up, he is calling for you." His persistence impressed even some of them. Then, throwing off his coat, Bartimaeus, the blind beggar who no one had ever paid any attention to, pushed through the crowd to where Jesus was standing and waiting for him.

"What do you want me to do for you?" asked Jesus. As I mentioned in last week's sermon, Jesus almost always asked people to state specifically what they wanted. He knew it was very important for individuals to clarify in their minds what they really wanted.

Many unhappy people cannot put their finger on the real cause of their distress. Many unfulfilled people cannot even tell you what it would take to satisfy them. Many of us have no clear idea or conception of what our deepest needs, our real desires, and our highest priorities are. And because we have never clearly defined the problem or clarified our goals, we spend a lot of time wandering around with no sense of direction. We don't know what to put first, second, or third in our lives.

If I were to ask you this morning what the most pressing need in your life is right now, could you tell me? Bartimaeus was blind and a beggar. He was poor. He could have begged for food or money. But he knew he could get along all right in the world if he had but one thing — his vision. He said to Jesus, “Master, let me receive my sight.” Jesus replied, “Go your way, your faith has made you well.” And immediately, Bartimaeus received his sight and followed Jesus on the way.

Before we go further into the meaning of this story for the early church and its relevance for us today, 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 also consisted of preaching and teaching, his healing ministry was so important that almost one-fifth of the gospel stories are devoted to healing.

This healing ministry was a practical application and demonstration of his teaching. What better way is there to show God’s love than to help people with their physical and emotional ills? Jesus believed and taught that God desires good health for all of us. It is never God’s will that we should be sick or disabled in any way.

A second comment: Jesus did not teach or imply that illness, disease, or physical or mental limitations of any kind were a direct punishment from God, although there were people in his time who believed that they were, in the same way as some people still believe today.

At the same time, Jesus also knew, as we know, that illness or disease may be the result of our own bad habits, wrong choices, or the wrong choices and bad habits 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 have lung cancer or some other lung disease or heart problems. Or if I am a careless and reckless driver, or drive while under the influence of alcohol, my chances of having an accident that may cripple me, kill me, or kill or cripple others are increased. But then I shouldn’t blame God or say that it is God’s will that caused the accident.

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.

More and more, we are discovering that the body’s natural built-in immune system is directly affected by our emotions and 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 enormous 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.”

Frequently, 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 within us to work again. I believe that Jesus had a remarkable ability to do this, but we also have that ability.

One more comment: In the gospel stories, the healing of an individual is remembered not only because of the incident itself but because they carry a broader meaning of coming to understand God and creation in a new way. For example, Jesus is understood as one who brings people from darkness into light, from blindness to sight. And that includes all of us. As one verse of an old hymn puts it: “Once I was blind, but now I can see, the light of the world is Jesus.”

Thus, the healing of the blind beggar reminded the early church, and it reminds us today, that all of us are blind in one way or another and need new vision.

Isn’t it true that we are often blind to the possibilities in ourselves and in others? Jesus was the opposite. He could see unlimited possibilities in the people he met, potentialities that others were blind to, and many times possibilities that the individuals could not see in themselves.

More and more of us are now aware of the suffering and tragedy that the blindness of prejudice has caused through the centuries. The blindness that teaches that people are inferior or superior by reason of the color of their skin has caused more innocent suffering than almost any other kind of blindness. The blindness that has kept women out of many areas of life and work and still does is similar in nature.

We are often blind to new ideas or new ways of seeing or understanding God and creation. When people believed the world was flat, it was difficult to convince them to open their eyes and see the world in a new way. In his remarkable book, Coming of Age in the Milky Way, Timothy Ferris traces the history of how humankind has viewed the universe, beginning with the ancient Sumerian, Chinese, and Korean astronomers, through the Egyptians who regarded the sky as a kind of tent canopy supported by the mountains that demarked the four corners of the earth, up through our present understanding of the cosmos. His survey strongly underscores the need to continue to be open to new ways of seeing God’s creation and God’s workings.

The point is that the blind beggar Bartimaeus was not the only person who needed healing from blindness that day. His blindness was the most obvious. Consider again the people in the crowd. They tried to silence his request for mercy. They told him to be quiet, to shut up. They were blind to the fact that God loved this blind beggar as much as them. As far as the people in the crowd were concerned, this blind beggar had no claim on Jesus or anyone else. He was poor and blind and 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.

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 persistent courage to cry out — and he is healed.

The kind of blindness the crowd exhibited is widespread. I remember the story in the newspapers about a young black man who had been told at age 14 that he was severely retarded. He was in prison and had been given an I.Q. test on which the score was computed to be 69. “You are seriously retarded,” he was told. But he refused to believe it. He was persistent like Bartimaeus. He went to see about getting some education but again was told that he wasn’t too bright. Not to be put down, at age 15, he started third grade. In weeks, he had finished the 8th grade and then some time later, high school. With scholarships from the State Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation, he finished four years of college at Kentucky State with a degree in sociology.

Later he carried a 4.0 straight-A average in the University of Louisville graduate school and then began earning a good salary as Project Director for the Youth Service Bureau there, an agency that seeks to help keep young people out of jail.

“What it proves to me,” he said, “is that we need to stop categorizing people. These people made a mistake. If they did it to me, how many other young blacks have they done the same thing to?” To put people in rigid categories and try to keep them there is a severe form of blindness.

Ron Patterson, the minister of our United Church of Christ in Dayton, Ohio, tells this story about his blindness and its cure. One day years ago, as part of his training, he was working at Boston City Hospital as a chaplain’s assistant and was assigned to a prison ward. One of the prisoners there was a big-time drug dealer. It was his duty to visit him because he was very ill. With half-hearted energy and pseudo-compassion, he did his duty. Later he confessed this to the Roman Catholic nun who was his supervisor. He said, “How can I go and pray with this man who is ruining the life of this city? He deserves his illness and a whole lot more.” The nun said to him, “Patterson, who died and elected you God? Somewhere deep within that man, covered by layers of pain and denial and every rotten thing he has ever done, there is the kernel of God’s image. Your only job is to see that spark. And the only way you can ever see it is to forget everything else about whatever anyone else has told you about right and wrong and believe with your whole heart that the spark is there. He, too, just as much as anyone you will ever meet, is a child of God’s love.”

Jesus listened to the blind beggar and not the crowd. He stopped and said, “Call him.” The crowd could hardly believe it. His stopping and his attention said clearly, “This blind beggar is important. He counts. He can be rid of his blindness and his begging.” By his actions, Jesus was also saying to the crowd, “You also are blind. You need to see this man in a new way, the way I see him and the way God sees him. Furthermore, this man is to be commended for his courage and persistence in seeking to overcome his problem and for his persistent belief in the mercy and goodness of God. You need to be healed of your kind of blindness as much as he needs to be healed of his.”

Whether we are talking about blindness of the eyes, blindness of the heart, or blindness of the mind, those who do not know they are blind will never be able to see. Bartimaeus knew he was blind; the people in the crowd were not aware of their kind of blindness.

All of us are blind in one way or another. The good news is that we too can receive the gift of God’s mercy and be healed of our blindness if we have the persistence of Bartimaeus. Amen.