Sunday, October 29, 2000
PERSISTENCE PAYS
Mark 10:46-52

Walter Harter was a rather average person with a slight limp who grew up in a farming community in the Midwest. Denied the opportunity of a college education due to his family's financial circumstances, his life's goal was to work 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. Then he decided to concentrate on a well-known retail chain that had 393 stores in the New York City metropolitan area. He decided to write each of them a personal letter asking to be considered for a position. He wrote 15 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 bus 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 he had received his letter, he would have sent it on to the Human Resources Department of the chain's main office.

Walter didn't know what a Human Resources Department was, but he followed the manager's directions to the large building on Park Avenue. There, he was taken to a stern-faced man sitting behind a large desk. He seemed to Walter 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 all 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 begin 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 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, an individual no one had ever paid any attention to, pushed through the crowd to where Jesus was standing and waiting.

"What do you want me to do for you?" asked Jesus. Almost always, Jesus asked people to state specifically what they wanted. He knew it was very important for individuals to clarify in their minds the exact nature of their request — in other words, to be as specific as possible.

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. Perhaps many of you have no clear conception of what your deepest needs are, your real desires, or your highest priorities. Because you have never clearly defined the problem or clarified your goal, you can spend a lot of time wandering around with no sense of direction. You can't decide what to put first, second, and third in your life. Persistence doesn't work for you because you are not sure what goal to persist in seeking. There are people who become perpetual students in colleges

and universities because they are unable to decide, even after 3 or 4 years, what their major should be.

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 he was a beggar. He was poor. He could've said his most pressing need was for more food and money. But what he wanted more than anything else was to have his sight restored. So he said, "Teacher, let me receive my sight." Jesus replied, "Go your way, your faith has made you well."

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, mental, and spiritual health of women and men than any other religious leader in history. That's because he was interested in the whole person. Therefore, it is no accident that one-fifth of the stories remembered by the early church and included in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are healing stories.

His healing ministry of the whole person was a practical application of his teaching. What better way is there to show God's love than to help people with their physical, emotional, and spiritual ills? He 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 mental or physical 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 today still believe that.

At the same time, Jesus also knew, as we know, that illness, disease, or other problems can be the result of our own bad habits, wrong choices, or the bad habits or wrong choices of others. For example, we now know that smoking can lead to all kinds of health problems. Thus, if you continue with the habit, you shouldn't be surprised if one day you have lung cancer or some other ailment. If you are a careless and reckless driver, or drive while under the influence of alcohol, your chances of having an accident that could cripple or kill you, and kill or cripple others, are increased. Then you 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. People filled with hate and resentment do not heal as quickly.

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 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 things can hinder the healing power. Dr. Bernie Segal, 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, prayer, and/or medicine can be the trigger that sets these healing forces within us to work again. Jesus had a remarkable ability to do this, and 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 the story helped the early church, and helps us, to understand God and creation in a new way. So the healing of the blind beggar reminded the early church, and it reminds us, that all of us are blind in one way or another and need new vision. As I said in another sermon some months ago, we all have different kinds of vision deficit disorder. Some of us are blind to the possibilities in ourselves and others. There are those who suffer from the blindness of prejudice. Think of the blindness to new ideas. 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. The list could go on and on.

The point is that the blind beggar 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 healing. They were blind to the fact that God loved this blind beggar as much as the rest of them. They thought 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. 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 saw things they didn’t see. He saw the healing power of God available through Jesus. He asked that the power of the Powerful One be given to him, who has no claim except the persistent courage to ask for healing.

On the positive side, the ability to visualize, to have a vision of what you want your life to be or the goals you want to accomplish, and to persist in that vision is the first step in helping that to happen. All areas of our lives can benefit from persistent positive visualization. Disney World was not completed until after the death of Walt Disney. Shortly following the theme park’s opening, a person who was touring the facility remarked to his host, “Isn’t it a shame that Walt Disney did not live to see this wonderful park?” The host replied, “He did see it. That’s why it’s here today.”

Persistence pays! One of the most inspiring stories this past year of the healing power of persistence and positive visualization is that of Lance Armstrong.

His story begins in Plano, Texas. Like many athletic prodigies, his talents appeared early. He could probably have excelled in many different sports. As it was, he became a top swimmer and triathlete during his teenage years. The U.S. Cycling Federation took notice and got him training with the Junior National Cycling Team before he even graduated from high school.

Within a year or so, he'd competed in the Junior World Championships in Moscow and was signed to the professional/amateur racing team. He next won the U.S. Amateur Championship.

He appeared to be at the threshold of a charmed life. Young, strong, and talented, his career started taking on the appearance of superstardom. He next entered the arena of international cycling. His winning spirit helped his team reach number five in the world by 1993. Just three years later, in 1996, he was expected to win the Tour de France itself.

In the world of competitive cycling, it is the supreme test of strength and endurance. For 22 days, 20 different stages, and 2,286 miles, some of the world's most conditioned athletes compete as they work the pedals of their racing bicycles against hills and valleys, city streets, and always the onset of exhaustion.

But in 1996, some symptoms appeared that he couldn't ignore anymore. Headaches, blurry vision, soreness in the groin area, an overall ill feeling, and even coughing up blood were enough to get him into the doctor's office. Suddenly, out of nowhere, his entire life, his future, and his well-being all came crashing down at once. The diagnosis had come back as cancer — massive cancer.

An especially aggressive form of testicular cancer was spreading like wildfire throughout his body. It had established itself in his abdomen, his lungs, and even his brain. There were eleven masses in his lungs alone, some the size of golf balls. His brain was invaded by two malignancies. Best estimate of survival? Only 50/50.

We know that the mind and the body are linked inextricably and that how you think can promote or hinder the healing process. Maybe that helps explain in part the miraculous recovery of Lance Armstrong in the year from 1996 to 1997. He gives credit to the best doctors he could find in the field. Their approach was as aggressive as the cancer itself. It was a year of pain and misery, but it was not a year of depression, resignation, failure, or lack of persistence. After a year, he was declared cancer-free.

Now came the rebuilding process. In two years of persistence and hard work, his body came back to a strength perhaps greater than before. In 1999, he won the Tour de France.

At the victory line in Paris, he was quoted as saying, "If there's one thing I say to those who use me as their example, it's that if you ever get a second chance in life, you've got to go all the way." He has done that. And this year, he won the race again. He's 27 years old, a champion athlete, husband, and soon-to-be father. He is an example of how positive persistence pays.

Because of his persistence, Jesus heard the blind beggar and not the crowd. The crowd could hardly believe it. By giving his attention to the blind beggar, he was saying to everyone, "This man is important. He counts." He was also saying to the crowd, "Maybe you are blind in some other ways. This man is to be commended for his courage and persistent belief in the mercy and goodness of God."

Persistence pays. Amen.