

Edina Morningside Community Church
United Church of Christ
Sunday, October 25, 2015
Rev. Howard K. Bell
"Followed him on the way..."

A common element in both of our texts today is about understanding what it means to be blind – physically or spiritually - and what it might mean to receive sight after having been blind – physically or spiritually.

Job struggled with spiritual blindness. This week we see Job's response to God's challenge. *"Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know...I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you..."*

I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eyes see you. For Job to say that his eyes have seen God is a most interesting way for Job to speak of his encounter with God. Nowhere in the book is there an indication that Job saw a vision of God. Clearly Job is speaking now of having overcome spiritual blindness. His verbal encounter with God opened his spiritual eyes. He acknowledges that the words he spoke to God were without an understanding of God. In his new spiritual sightedness, he now repents to God for his challenging words.

Most Biblical scholars have significant problems with the concluding verses in the book of Job in today's text. *"And the Lord restored the fortunes of Job...and the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before."* (Job 42: 10.) These verses seem to imply that all the suffering that Job endured is in some way discounted or dismissed because his fortunes and even his family has been restored with seven new sons and three new daughters. Those who have experienced such tragedy as the loss of a child, testify to the fact that new children can never replace a lost child or make less real the significant grief and suffering that has occurred and that remains in the life of the parent who has suffered such a loss. However, it is important to observe that Job's overcoming spiritual blindness occurred before the restoration of Job's life and fortunes. Biblical commentator, Dale P. Andrews, says: *"...we see that Job's perspective has been altered by God's response. The suffering has not yet ceased. Job's transformation begins even before the suffering abates. It is the awareness of YHWH's presence that transforms."*¹

Therefore, I believe, one message to take from the book of Job, is that God never abandons us during our suffering. Job did not understand and we, today, do not understand why good people suffer, but Job affirms, and we, today, affirm – when our eyes have been opened – that God is present with us in the midst of our suffering. God provides us with the capacity to persevere, especially when a community surrounds us. This faith community is a beautiful example of a non-judgmental and caring community. We are a community that does not judge those in our midst who are suffering, but rather offers care and

¹ Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year B, Volume 4: Season After Pentecost 2 (Propers 17-Reign of Christ).

companionship for those who are suffering. This community also gives testimony to their own experience of overcoming spiritual blindness and gives witness to their faith in the all-encompassing love of God.

Before turning to our Gospel text about Jesus healing a blind beggar, I want to share with you a personal story about my first opportunity to know a person who was blind. In my freshman year of college, I agreed to be a reader for a fellow student named Myron who was blind. We were enrolled in the same class. Myron asked me to come to his dorm room one evening to read to him the assigned text for the class. When I had previously been with Myron, it had been on "my turf" where he was blind in my sighted world. When I went for our reading appointment to his dorm room, I was entering his "turf". I smugly assumed that I was the more privileged one since I was the "sighted one". I assumed that I was in the helper role. I had not even considered the possibility that this fellow student who happened to be blind might have things to teach and to offer to me. I do not know now why it was so surprising for me, but I was surprised to find his dorm room completely dark. It was nighttime and there was no light on in the room. In hindsight, of course, it is obvious that he would have no need to turn the light on. I quickly came to feel that – on his turf and in the dark - I was the handicapped one since I needed light in order to see.

In the time we spent together, I came to view Myron's experience of being blind very differently than I had previously imagined. I came to realize that Myron had adapted extremely well to his lack of sight. He had no difficulty functioning in the dark. On the other hand, I was totally incompetent about how to maneuver in the dark without bruising my shins and probably breaking anything that wasn't tied or bolted down. Ironically, it is my eyes that were opened in this encounter. Myron had many things he could teach me. He taught me about having a positive attitude toward life. He taught me about the human capacity to adapt to whatever circumstances one might find in life. The most amazing learning that I had was, from Myron's perspective, he did not understand himself as limited in any way. Since he had no experience with sightedness, it was not something that he missed. Eventually, Myron was able to get his textbooks in braille and had no further need of my help. I, however, felt blessed by all that I had learned from him.

We turn now to the story of the physical healing of the blind Bartimaeus in today's Gospel text from Mark. As Jesus and his followers left Jericho, we are told that "*Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, the son of Timaeus, was sitting by the roadside.* (Mark 10: 46) Bartimaeus calls out to Jesus: "*Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!*" (Mark 10: 47) Once again, the disciples and others following Jesus, try to silence this outcast, just like they had the children. But Bartimaeus continues to cry out until Jesus heard him. Then Jesus stopped and called Bartimaeus to him. Bartimaeus then did a curious thing. "*So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus.*" (Mark 10: 50)

Commentator, Lincoln E. Galloway, provides the following insight: "*The blind man ...comes to Jesus and does so by casting aside his cloak. It is quite reasonable to regard his cloak as representing his most treasured possession. It has kept him warm through the cold nights. It*

may also hold the meager spoils of his begging. In his act of throwing off his cloak, we see the image of one who leaves his former life behind.²

Then Jesus asks the same question of Bartimaeus that he asked of James and John, “*What do you want me to do for you?*” (Mark 10: 51) Bartimaeus then asks to receive his sight. “*And Jesus said to him, ‘Go your way; your faith has made you well.’*” After receiving his sight, rather than going his way, our scripture ends with the statement that Bartimaeus “*...followed him (Jesus) on his (Jesus’) way.*” (Mark 10: 52)

I believe we are called today as a faith community and as individuals to deepen our commitment to following Jesus on his way. Are we willing to cast aside our cloak in order to follow Jesus? What might that mean? Let me suggest these lessons from our three stories today. From Job casting aside our cloak means to be in deeper relationship with God and trusting in God’s goodness even in the midst of suffering. From Myron casting aside our cloak means to see life as full of possibilities, adapting our lives to circumstances that confront us, and living life to the fullest. From Bartimaeus casting aside our cloak means to leave our former life – life governed by our concern with scarcity - to adopt a belief in abundance, and to follow Jesus on his way in renewed ways as individuals and as faith community healed of our blindness and open to the transformation that God offers us.

These lessons are critical for this faith community during our Interim Time and especially as we currently are in discernment about our 2016 pledges. Last year, you passed a budget containing a \$31,000 deficit. Have we become blind to that reality? It was hoped that giving might increase to cover that deficit. A few people have made additional contributions, but certainly not sufficient to cover that amount. As we live into our mission and vision, we need everyone to deepen our commitment to following Jesus on his way by contributing more – contributing more of our ideas, contributing even more of our talents, contributing more time or possibly learning new ways of governance that will allow us to contribute our time more efficiently, and contributing more of our financial resources trusting in God’s abundance. May this faith community experience new spiritual sight to see our way into a more vital future. May it be so. Amen.

² Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year B, Volume 4: Season After Pentecost 2 (Propers 17-Reign of Christ).