

22nd Sunday after Pentecost + October 24, 2021

Mark 10:46-52, "Learning to Walk in the Dark"

Grace Lutheran Church, Hatfield, PA

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Not long ago I heard someone talking enthusiastically about the small church in his home town, which he had recently visited. His words stuck in my mind: "You know what I like best about that church? The coffee hour."

What?! Not the music, or the preaching, or the liturgy...but the coffee hour?

I knew what he was really saying and I'm sure you do, too. He loved that time of fellowship. The truth is, as much as Lutherans proverbially cherish their coffee, the point isn't the beverage. It's the community. It's people coming together over a hot drink whose real purpose is not to give us a jolt but to do the opposite, to allow us rest for an undefined time in each other's company. "Let's have coffee" really means "Let's just sit together and share what is on our hearts." The Lutheran coffee hour is the church's designated time for God's people to do just that.

Where our coffee-hour fellowship here at Grace is concerned, though, we are still in the dark. I have floated the idea of restoring it but keep running up against a host of obstacles: How can we do it safely? Where would it be located? What about snacks? Who would make it and who would clean it up? ("I'll do that," I offered to one committee. They quickly said, "No, you won't.")

In our Gospel reading, blind Bartimaeus is also dealing with a host of obstacles that is keeping him in the dark--that is, from being fellowship with others. He is outsider in every sense--outside the gates, off the path, outside the economy of this wealthy city, outside its civic and religious life. Although he is identified as a son (bar = son of Timaeus), he almost certainly does not have a family of his own, because as a blind beggar he has no way to sustain one. Everything about him spells social exclusion. He is utterly alone in the dark.

Here in Mark, Jesus has just left Jericho on his final journey to Jerusalem. Bartimaeus cannot see but he knows who is passing by. He shouts for mercy. At first the huge crowd merely serves as another obstacle; they harshly order him to be quiet. Fortunately this only makes Bartimaeus shout louder and he finally gets Jesus' attention, quite possibly because he alone in Mark's entire Gospel identifies Jesus correctly. Only Bartimaeus, somehow, knows to name him "Son of David." Jesus stops in his tracks.

Notice though what happens next. Jesus does not make his way over to Bartimaeus, nor does he even address him directly. Instead, Jesus gives the crowd an instruction: "Call him here." Suddenly everyone realizes Bartimaeus is being called into God's kingdom. "Take heart," they tell him with sudden compassion. "Get up, he is calling you."

It's actually kind of humorous. First they're shouting to him, "Be quiet!" Then, "No, actually, step right up!"

But the great lesson for us today is that the gathered community becomes the agent of Bartimaeus' healing. It is they who summon the blind man to Jesus' side so the his faith can be affirmed and the healing take place.

We see the same thing in Jeremiah, that the community is the agent of restoration. The call from God for the Israelites to return from exile specifically includes the blind and the lame. How are they supposed to make the long and difficult journey? Normally they couldn't; they would either be left behind or abandoned by the side of the road when the going got too tough. But the implication here in Jeremiah is clear: The community will bear them up. Those who can will lead, lift, and carry those who cannot. They will do whatever it takes. In this way the gathered community provides the means by which all will return to God, on that life-giving road by brooks of water, on straight paths.

In many ways we too are God's exiled people, struggling in the darkness of not knowing. Not knowing when we can resume the fullness of our activities together. Not knowing if there will be another winter surge. Not knowing the outcome of illnesses. Uncertain diagnoses. Questionable prognoses. Not knowing what the future of Grace Lutheran Church will be 10 years from now. Not knowing whether the institutional church is even viable anymore. Not knowing whether we should be considering another model or a different kind of worship service. Not knowing when we can resume coffee hour. Not knowing how many overtimes [it takes to win a college football game....9].

But darkness is not dark if we are walking together, because the experience of navigating it together will strengthen our discipleship. Just look at what Bartimaeus does when he regains his sight. He doesn't run off to tell all his friends. He immediately becomes a follower of Jesus.

To my mind, the church is a work of God's amazing grace. The church is God's people gathering regularly, week in and week out. You can count on it. We never miss a week. And not because we are workaholics but because God never takes a vacation. It is only through this body, one that you can always count on, that God's boundless love and forgiveness can be poured out for everyone, especially those on the margins, in a way that becomes healing for the world.

So come to church. Come as you are. Come especially if you feel completely alone with nowhere to turn. Come especially if your step is slow. Come especially if your mind is anxious and your heart heavy. If you don't believe this is how you should come to church, to return to God, just look at our reading from Jeremiah and you will see this is exactly how God's people are called to return to him: God says through the prophet, "With weeping they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back." Amen.