

Mark 10:46-52
Excerpt from Proper 25, Year B
Christ Church – Martinsville
October 25, 2015

... Jesus stops his travels with the large crowd leaving Jericho, to have this man brought to him. And Jesus uses the seminal word: “Call him here.”

Bartimaeus’ response is to throw off his cloak and enthusiastically spring up to get to Jesus. We have to wonder if Bartimaeus also perceives that this is more than just an invitation to healing. Does he, on some level, realize this also is a call to become a disciple of Jesus? Throwing off his cloak, perhaps his only possession and one that is necessary for protection from the elements, demonstrates his willingness to give up everything in order to follow Jesus on the way to Jerusalem.

Some of your members are reading a book together by Dwight Zscheille that is called, People of the Way. This book explores the current wave of rethinking the way in which we approach our baptismal vows and follow Jesus. If one hasn’t read any similar books, such as Diana Butler Bass’ Christianity after Religion, reading this book is somewhat shocking. Who has even imagined reconsidering the way in which we do church? But with further consideration of what is presented, it becomes clear that we are in different times. Either we begin to re-conceptualize what it means

to follow Jesus or we will be left with empty buildings and mere approximations of the Christian life.

Part of the task is to begin to understand the ways that we have created barriers to following Jesus. The way we have defined church as being only among these walls, or ministry as something that only is done out of this building, as opposed to ministry being a way to live our lives every day, no matter where we find ourselves and with whom.

I recently read an article about a church that in the last decade took some rather dramatic steps to redefine the way they see themselves as church. The title of the article is “Why an Urban Church Abandoned Traditional Charity”. This was about an United Methodist Church, who had a series of outreach programs, including a food pantry, after-school program, clothing ministry, and a summer youth program that served up to 250 children per day. By many standards, that sounds like a thriving place with important ministries, but these programs have been discontinued in a deliberate way. Instead, this church came to believe that it was more important to engage with those around them and not see them as charity cases. One member is quoted as saying:

“The church has done a lot of work where we have treated the people around us as if, at worst, they are a different

species and, at best, as if they are people to be pitied and helped by us.”

With that in mind, this church for the last decade has been reorienting itself. Rather than a bestower of blessings, the church is aiming to be something more humble. Unlike in the past when the goal would be to uncover surface-level “holes” in the city and try to fill them on behalf of the less fortunate, this community began to listen for “hints about the gifts of others”. They literally began to get to know the people who lived around the church and to appreciate the gifts they bring to the world vs. the old habit of shifting resources to them while maintaining a spiritual distance from them.

We all are in the habit of doing it the other way. I can’t think of a church with which I am familiar that isn’t in this habit. Yet I couldn’t help but think about the story of Jesus calling Bartimaeus, the blind beggar sitting in the dust of the road. It would be much easier for Jesus to not get to know him. He could have ignored his yelling and continued marching on to his destiny at Jerusalem. He could have asked the disciples to throw a little food at him or in our modern framework, offer a homeless shelter to him, all the while not recognizing the gift he is to the world. But it is Bartimaeus who sees Jesus for who he is and is to become, when those closest to Jesus cannot see it. He who

seems to have so little to offer, is instead one of the most faithful followers of Jesus and supports him as he approaches the very difficult journey ahead. Time and again in the Bible, this is the way we understand that God works. We not only must recognize the gifts of Bartimaeus but also see that potentially we are Bartimaeus—no better, no worse—because we all are children of God.

Christ Church Martinsville, like every other church in our diocese, currently is in a transition of becoming something different from what it has been and is right now. And that is so much more than just calling a new priest. It includes beginning to see yourselves and understand your ministries in new ways. It includes looking beyond these walls and the membership of Christ Church for the gifts of others, who otherwise might be overlooked.

You have been and will continue to be called to follow Jesus. What that looks like changes over time, as disorienting as that may seem. But just like Bartimaeus, we all must throw off our cloak of comfort and open our eyes. And Jesus says to us, “Go; your faith will make you well.

*The Rev. Canon Melissa Hays-Smith,
Deacon
Missioner for the Roanoke Convocation
Diocese of Southwestern Virginia*