

A HOMILY BY RICHARD B. TUDOR

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Prologue

It dawned on me the other day that Trinity Episcopal Church now has six persons who are cleared to preach sermons regularly. That fact struck me during one of our staff meetings when we were attempting to put together a preaching calendar. I mention this because it's unusual for a parish of this size to have that many people sharing the pulpit. One of the benefits is the fact that it offers a variety of voices and interpretation to the congregation. I would make one observation. Mine is the only male voice.

Something else which I wonder about in this situation is whether we all share a common definition of the meaning of the word "sermon?" I keep pushing people to struggle with the question: What is the purpose of preaching? When I came out of seminary, I had the idea that the "preacher" is supposed to stand up after the reading of the Gospel and explain what the lessons mean and then attempt to tie them all together? I have over the years drifted away from that practice. If that is the expectation, then I am - more often than not - guilty of breaking that rule. Usually I ignore the "Propers for the day" and, instead, talk about a subject which I feel is a bit more contemporary. What I have learned is that, for some strange reason, I receive many more comments when I preach a sermon about Steve Goedecker not opening his appliance store on Sundays than if I preach on one of the parables.

There is a reason. Sadly, but certainly understandably, the Bible increasingly finds an uneasy home in our modern world. By that I mean that what is said to us in the Bible – a voice from a much different place and time – is not as applicable today as it once was. That's an understatement! Besides the cultural issues, a big problem with the Bible is the fact that it speaks authoritatively. Today personal choice is in and external authority is out.

Whatever the problem with the Bible, individuals who get up in pulpits to preach the Word of God need to deal creatively with whatever text they are preaching on. And that is not a sudden insight in the 21st century. When I started reading systematic theology over fifty years ago (1968 to be exact), the first few lines in the textbook's introduction were the following:

Theology, as a function of the Christian Church, must serve the needs of the Church. [It] must satisfy two basic needs: the statement of the truth of the Christian message and the interpretation of this truth for every new generation. [Therefore] Theology moves back and forth between two poles, the eternal truth of its foundation and the temporal situation in which the eternal truth must be received

Systematic Theology, Paul Tillich, p. 3

In other words, what Paul Tillich is saying is that when you stand up to preach, you need to be aware of a tension between these two needs: the Christian message which never changes and the situation to which you are preaching which always changes. Today there is a wide gap between those two issues! What I am trying to emphasize is the fact that we all need to be a lot more imaginative in addressing the message to the always changing situation.

All right! what is the eternal message that never changes? “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.’ (John 3:16) or “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself (II Corinthians 5:19). But people who would preach the word of God have to do better than just reading Bible verses to their listeners.

I believe deeply that people in church congregations come to worship - like the Greeks in John 12:21 – to see Jesus. “Sir, we would see Jesus.” They come not to just hear about Jesus but to see Him! In my mind that should be the goal of attending worship. When you go home after the service is over and someone says to you, “What happened at church today? You can say, “A strange thing happened, I saw Jesus!” I happen to think that that’s the reason we preach sermons. We need to present Jesus in such a convincing way to those who have come seeking him that he becomes alive to them. If you are not here to see Jesus, I don’t know what we can do for you. But if you are here to see Him, the goal of every sermon preached should intend to show you the Jesus who we worship as the living Lord.

The Blind See and The Seeing Are Blind

Some of you are probably sitting there thinking to yourselves, what is he talking about? How are we going to see Jesus? Now it’s funny that you would be asking that question, because I have the answer. It’s found in the story of blind Bartimaeus which just happens to be the Gospel reading for today (Mark 10:46=52).

On the surface this story appears to be an example of a typical encounter between Jesus and someone who is in need. Jesus is walking along a road in Judea near Jericho with his followers. A blind man calls out to him. Jesus stops and talks to him. He then heals him. End of story.

But not so fast! Life is not that simple and neither are these “books” called the Gospels. I will make a couple of observations about “Mark” which will allow me to put the reading about blind Bartimaeus into the proper context. When you study the Bible, context is always critical.

Mark is the shortest Gospel, only sixteen chapters, and the oldest. It was “put together” in c. 70 AD. it has two parts. In the first eight chapters, Mark shows us Jesus wandering along the back roads of Galilee. He performs miraculous healings and he teaches crowds of people through the medium of parables. In the first part, what is called the “Messianic Secret” is dominant. Jesus seems to want no one to know who he is! He heals somebody and then tells them, “Go and don’t tell anyone!” Suddenly, In the middle of Mark’s Gospel, this changes. In the eighth chapter, Jesus asks his disciples a pointed question, “Who do the people say that I am?” He receives a number of incorrect answers. John the Baptist, Elijah, etc. then he asks them, “But who do you say that I am.” Peter responds famously, “You are the Christ!” Now the Messianic secret is out, in full view! From then on, the game changes. Jesus now directs all his teaching to his followers.

He begins by telling them some bad news, i.e. that they are journeying to Jerusalem where He will be rejected and executed. He tells them that he is going to die but in three days He will rise from the dead. Peter and the rest of the disciples do not exactly embrace this information. In fact, they ignore it! And it's difficult to ignore! Jesus foretells his future to them not once, not twice, but three times. And the disciples never comprehend his words. They continue to persist on living in their own dream world where they believe that Jesus is going to be the King of Israel and they will enjoy positions of great privilege. As they walk, now through Judea, Jesus even tells them that those who desire to become his followers must take up their own cross and follow him. He might as well be talking to stones; the disciples repeatedly show themselves to be blind. They remain in the dark about what it means to follow Jesus! And thus they arrive at Jericho and the encounter with Bartimaeus.

Blind Bartimaeus is a symbolic figure who Mark holds up to us as a model. The story is a metaphor! He is intended to be a contrast to the disciples. Bartimaeus is blind, but he sees! The disciples of Jesus are not blind but they don't see. Here is the important issue: As we listen to this story, we must allow ourselves to be drawn into it to the point of a personal admission that we also are blind. It's a strange thing about the stories of Jesus. We think that we are interpreting the words of Jesus, but they end up interpreting us. That is what should happen in this story.

We are unable to see Jesus until He opens our eyes, the eyes of our faith! How does this happen? Like Bartimaeus we must be aggressive! We must ask as Bartimaeus did: "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" We must acknowledge our need for help! When Jesus asks us what He can do for us. We must respond, "Master, let me receive my sight." Only then will we learn to see with the eye of our soul! This is what St. Augustine called our inner eye. This is what Christianity is all about, i.e. the development of the inner eye of faith. We must implore Jesus to give us the spiritual power to see, really see into the divine mystery of our lives.! Then and only then will he assure us that our faith has made us well.

As the sequence hymn this morning, we sang the most popular hymn in the hymnal 1982: *Amazing Grace*. It was written by John Newton in the 18th century. Newton in his earlier life was the captain of a slave ship. He had a transforming experience through his exposure to Jesus in the church. He became a preacher and in the course of his life wrote five hymns. The words of *Amazing Grace* bear directly on the Gospel reading. The first stanza:

"Amazing Grace! How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see."

Amen