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Healing Hearts

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When I met Bob, he had nothing good whatsoever to say about the church. His wife, on the other hand, had decided to return to the small, family parish that was the first parish where I served as Rector. They had left after some past disagreement or hurt and decided to check out the new rector not long after I arrived in the parish. Bob's wife was very happy to be back, and quickly became active in the life of the parish, but not Bob. Bob rarely attended church services and when I did see him he had plenty of negative things to say, especially about how bad things used to be at that parish.

Despite my best efforts to listen and counsel and show Bob that things had changed, it was clear he still had not healed from an old wound, and despite the passage of time it still hurt. I can remember his criticism of a sermon I gave on forgiveness where he lectured me about how there are some folks who prefer not to forgive, and no minister or priest or preacher should tell anyone what they should do. That was when Bob told me he had very little use for church, preachers, and God.

One day, Bob's wife called me to say her husband had just returned from his yearly health check up and the doctors were suspicious that something was wrong with his heart. They were scared, and asked me to pray, which I gladly did, just like I do for anyone who asks me to pray for them. Many tests later, it was discovered that Bob's heart was in terrible condition. Two of his arteries were completely blocked, and the third was nearly blocked too. The doctors said it was a miracle he hadn't had a heart attack, and if he did have one, it was unlikely he'd survive. So Bob had surgery and the surgery was successful, with doctors and surgeons again telling Bob how lucky he was.

The day after his surgery, Bob asked his wife to ask me to come visit him in the hospital. I went not only because I was asked, but because Bob wanting me to visit him was a new thing. When I got to his hospital room, I noticed Bob looked different, but I didn't realize how very different until he told me all about what had happened, how he had been told how lucky he was, and how he realized how very close to death he had been even though he never felt sick. He told me he disagreed with the doctors, he wasn't lucky, he said, he was blessed. He believed God was giving him a second chance and he had no intention of missing out on the healing God had given. He said he hadn't believed God loved him, but now he felt it, and that meant everything mattered to him more: his wife, his children, his grandchildren, his community. He asked me to give him Holy Communion that day, because that meant more to him, too.

After that, Bob not only started attending church regularly, he started participating. He was in the kitchen flipping pancakes for the parish's annual pancake supper the night before Ash Wednesday; and he had brought some surprise secret ingredients to put into certain people's pancakes. Some people were surprised to find raisins in the pancakes he personally cooked and served them, others got blueberries; he made mine with dark chocolate chips. It was a beautiful way to make folks feel noticed, valued and loved. I had no idea Bob knew dark chocolate is my favorite. Bob also started ushering and after I left, served on vestry. Before he and his wife moved to Florida, I heard he had taken on the office of Treasurer for the parish. It was incredibly beautiful, holy, humbling, and inspiring to watch Bob live into his healed heart with gratitude, joy, and commitment. Bob even shared with me how forgiveness began to play a major role in his healing.

My former parishioner's experience reminds me of the man we heard about in today's Gospel lesson, the man named Bartimaeus who was blind, begging, and sitting beside a road before Jesus came strolling by with his disciples. This is a great story, one of hope, healing, and like Bob's experience, shows us what it can look like to go from sitting on the sidelines to following Jesus.

I find it interesting that the author of Mark chose to give us a lot of information about Bartimaeus: his condition, his location, what he did, even his full name is recorded, which doesn't happen very often in every gospel. Perhaps there is a good reason for this: maybe Bartimaeus had been a fixture on that corner, begging day in and day out for so many years everyone knew his name. That might be why the people in the crowd tried to shush him when he cried out to Jesus; they might have been embarrassed by his behavior, or his presence, or maybe were so used to him being the blind beggar sitting beside the road they couldn't imagine he had any desire or longing or wish to be anything other than what he was. As one commentator has said, as much as crowds -whoever they are- say they want change, too often the truth is their actions show they are much more comfortable with stereotypes that conveniently keep individuals or institutions in boxes that are easy to dismiss or complain about as useless, irrelevant, or not worth any time. Or perhaps Bartimaeus was known for his life after his healing. The actual reason is most likely lost somewhere in antiquity, but the story of his transformation is still with us here in Mark's Gospel to show us that despite efforts to silence his cries, Bartimaeus was noticed and called by Jesus.

Like other people Jesus called, especially his disciples, we heard Bartimaeus left his place and his means of eking out a living to answer that call. Notice how being blind didn't seem to get in the way of Bartimaeus moving from the side of the road to where Jesus was standing, waiting for him. And when he was asked the very same

question Jesus asked his disciples in last Sunday's Gospel, Bartimaeus answered very differently than James and John, he asked to see instead of a position of power. Perhaps because he already did see more clearly who Jesus is.

Perhaps Bartimaeus didn't just get his sight restored, perhaps he received a deeper kind of healing, sort of like Bob and his heart, so that Bartimaeus wasn't just able to recognize people and trees and such, he was able to see God Present with him in the person of Jesus. That may be why Bartimaeus followed Jesus along the way, which was a phrase the people in the early church used to describe a follower of Jesus or a Christian: they were followers of the Way.

What I love about the story of Bartimaeus is how he is an example to us of how gifts from God like healing, forgiveness, and hope, are not just opportunities to feel special, they are opportunities to live into what he had been given. Bartimaeus lived into his new sight. Bob lived into that beautiful heart, not just physical but the spiritual side of the heart, where the love of God is received and shared and practiced.

This is the perfect Gospel story to have this Sunday because today is also the day we are starting our season of stewardship. I have experienced hearing groans and seeing eyes roll if they aren't checking watches as soon as that word "stewardship" is spoken in a church, either by the preacher, warden, but most especially when it is spoken by the Treasurer. Somehow stewardship has become a dirty word that is code for "it's time to give money" and somehow that is seen as a bad thing. I've heard lots of complaints from folks like Bob before his heart was healed about how churches just want people's money. And it's too bad that negative mindset is so prevalent. I am aware there are churches or preachers who try and take advantage of people, but there is no logic in thinking that makes all churches or preachers thieves or dishonest. And it is even more unfortunate, because it is like a shouting crowd that can keep us from hearing or seeing a bigger, more whole picture of what God is up to here in our midst.

Stewardship is simply the opportunity to live into and use the gifts God has given to us as a parish and as individuals with gratitude, joy, and commitment. Here at Church of the Good Shepherd, it is hard to deny the many ways the Holy Spirit has been and is moving among us. We can see it in the way we have come together and grown together as Rector and Parish, in the ways ministries that are part of the fabric of this parish are evolving, and in the new ministries that we have been brave enough to try and enjoy. We can see it in the ways our vestry works together with prayerful thoughtfulness, attentive listening, and joyful laughter. We can see it whenever we look at our staff with appreciation. A parish is much more than a worship service on a Sunday morning; it is a system, a dynamic, a community, always growing, changing, where no single part is more important than the others, but together all the parts

contribute to a healthy whole. If we were to leave a part off, like stewardship, then we would be less than God dreams and calls us to be. We would be stuck on the side of the road instead of following Jesus.

This year's stewardship committee is asking us to reflect on the gifts we have been given as parish and compare them to a harvest. The healing we have felt, the ways we have grown, and to be grateful as we discern how to live into these gifts as we would any harvest through prayer, service or volunteering, and money. I know that's another word that people think is dirty or wrong to talk about in church. But money is nothing more than a tool we can use to help bring God's Kingdom closer to all people right here and right now. And money is needed just as prayer is needed and just as volunteerism is needed together to contribute to a healthy whole parish community. All these three contribute to keeping our building open and in good condition so we can use it for the ministries we are so good at, for paying the salaries of our staff and choral scholars, for the food that feeds people every Wednesday for free lunch, for the music we help make together and helps some folks feel closer to God, for the many ways we are following Jesus, like Bartimaeus, like Bob.

It's pretty easy to see we have been blessed and received so much love from God, we have a healthy harvest. So a season of reflection and discernment is not only appropriate, it is the holy way to begin our opportunity to live into all the love we have been given as we continue to follow Jesus.