

"FINDING GOD IN YOUR HANDICAPS"

Mark 10:46-52

Sermon preached by Dr. Harry Cahill

Babcock Presbyterian Church

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Did you ever have this happen to you? You're seated at the dinner table with your family or at a party with friends, you may even be in church, and yet even though you're surrounded by people, you still feel completely alone. And you think to yourself, "**Doesn't anyone even know I'm here?**" But then unexpectedly and suddenly you sense an opportunity and now's the time to seize the moment. At this point you don't care anymore if everyone knows your business, so you take a risk and for once you make yourself and your hidden ache known.

That's exactly what happened in today's gospel lesson. Blind Bartimaeus, maybe for the first time, dared to hope his life could be better so he made a big racket, calling attention to himself, and because he took the initiative he'd never be the same again.

Even if you're not blind, you still can identify with Bartimaeus because no matter who you are, despite your cheery and confident persona you have your hidden handicaps, be they spiritual, emotional, physical, or even all three. So, you're stuck, until you have an encounter with the only one who can make you well.

Keeping all this in mind, let's stop and take a closer look at this morning's lesson and see how this story can be your story too, because after all, Bartimaeus needed Jesus just as much as we do.

Jesus and the disciples were on the road to Jericho which would be his last stop before taking the final leg of his journey to Jerusalem and his crucifixion. It was almost Passover. Since everybody couldn't possibly go to celebrate this holy day in Jerusalem, those who stayed behind lined the roads greeting those going on ahead, so you can imagine the roads were jammed with heavy holiday traffic. Naturally there was excitement in the air, but this year even more so, because of Jesus. By now he was widely known for his fresh insight into the scriptures and his unique inner authority, for he healed and preached like no one else. Because of him lives were miraculously changed, as tax collectors, prostitutes and the irreligious became his closest followers if only because Jesus accepted and loved them like no one else ever had.

The people sensed something new and exciting was happening as Jesus broke down walls and built up relationships that never existed before. But there was something else going on. People who were elbowed out into the margins of society and ignored by the religious establishment were now being remembered. Outcasts, poor souls who for whatever reason knew hardcore rejection, were finally singled out,

loved and given a new lease on life.

That's why Bartimaeus made such a racket when he heard Jesus was just a few feet away. **"Jesus, have mercy on me!"** he cried. Poor Bartimaeus, in that crowd of people, a rejected member of society who lived his isolated, wretched life all by himself, having no one to scatter his darkness, until now.

Again, like Bartimaeus we all have that unresolved "something" keeping us from completely enjoying life the way we're supposed to. Oh yes, that's God's intention, that we enjoy himself, each other and the world around us. Isn't that why God made us in the first place?

God doesn't want us to suffer and despair, but because we have free will, sometimes we make bad choices we think will bring us satisfaction, but instead bring on us pain and sorrow.

"Ah," you say, **"but my handicap has nothing to do with free will. I've had this stone in my shoe ever since I can remember. Maybe it happened because of someone else's bad choices, but please don't pin the blame on me!"**

Fair enough. There are those instances when your handicaps have nothing to do with free will. Mental retardation, physical congenital defects, mental illness, injury due to human error or natural disasters, we call these "acts of God." If we could haul God into court and sue him as easily as we sue each other, maybe then justice would be done. But that's not going to happen, so maybe we need to consider whether or not it's time to move beyond blaming God and instead look long and hard for him in the lonely, broken places we call our handicaps.

Of course, looking for God in your handicaps isn't something we automatically do. We think we can only find God in life's beautiful places, like a gorgeous sunset, the birth of a baby, a loving family, beautiful music and fulfilling relationships. What we don't expect is finding God in life's unlovely places, inner city slums, shattered dreams, broken families, let alone our handicaps. But God is just as present in these unlikely places, maybe even more so.

Helen Keller, in this generation driven by celebrity, how I wish she had lived in our time. Blind and deaf since birth, listen to what she said more than seventy years back about her problems. **"I thank God for my handicaps, for through them, I have found myself, my work and my God."** Doesn't that blow your mind? Deaf, she could hear God's voice in the silence, blind, she could see God's blessings all around her, miraculously Helen Keller found God in her handicaps.

Wasn't it the same way with Bartimaeus? Hearing that Jesus was near, he called out to him. But don't forget, Jesus also called out to Bartimaeus. Likewise, totally isolated and marginalized by our handicaps, Jesus sees and calls out to you and me too; even though you're only one face in the crowd you're still singled out.

Bartimaeus was physically healed that day but there was also a spiritual healing: given insight, Bartimaeus, Mark tells us, **"immediately followed Jesus on the way."** Whenever Mark uses the phrase **"on the way"** he means one thing: the way to the cross. Bartimaeus became a disciple.

It's interesting to note that immediately after the story of Jesus and Bartimaeus, we find the story of Jesus triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Since Bartimaeus followed Jesus, he must have been there when Jesus was arrested, tried and crucified. It makes me wonder, did Bartimaeus remain faithful through all this or did he fall away? Of course, since we all have a little of Bartimaeus in each of us, we also have to wonder about ourselves.

What about you? When life goes sour what happens? Do you feel cheated because you think you can only see God in the beautiful places, or like Helen Keller, are you able to find God, yourself and your purpose in your handicaps?

But there's an even more intriguing question. Besides seeing God in life's beautiful places are you also able to find God, in your neighbor's handicaps.

The sad fact is that more times than not, we are blind to people with visible handicaps. Maybe we can hide our own, but some folks can't hide theirs. So, as a society, we usually ignore these folks and hope they'll just go away. Why? They make us feel uncomfortable, so we tell ourselves, "**They're not one of us.**" But truth be told, their handicaps should remind us of our common bond, we're all handicapped, we're all in this thing together, so shouldn't we love one another?

This is brilliantly illustrated in just two verses in this morning's gospel story. The first time Bartimaeus called out to Jesus, do you remember the crowd's reaction? "**Many sternly ordered him to be quiet.**" This blind beggar was an embarrassment, a nuisance, so shout him down and shut him up. But then something else wonderful happened: as soon as Jesus saw Bartimaeus not as a handicap but a person, the people in the crowd could suddenly see Bartimaeus as a person. What a subtle commentary on how the presence of Jesus can change our skewed perspectives on life. The people in the crowd were also given new sight, finally seeing Bartimaeus as Jesus saw him, a fellow human being far more than the sum total of his handicaps. Now instead of marginalizing Bartimaeus, they encouraged him. "**Cheer up Bartimaeus, Jesus is calling you.**"

There are two major points I hope you take home with you today. The first is this: your handicap, whatever you have, is one of those unlikely and unlovely places where you can find God, yourself and your purpose. Handicaps seem to be a curse until you let Jesus in, then your curse can become your blessing.

The second point: while you're in Christian community, becoming more aware of Jesus' presence in each other's handicaps, that's when we really are the Church because we now see each other as Jesus sees us, human beings, children of God, who are far more than the sum total of our handicaps. Instead of being embarrassed and trying to marginalize each other we become servants of one another.

One last thing. If you have found God in your handicaps and you have found here in this faith community full acceptance as a full fledged member of our faith community, by all means, continue your search for God by being servants to each other. Start looking deeper into yourself for all the beauty, courage, and truth God

has placed within you and then quickly give it all away. Spend yourself like a drunken sailor, spending your life, your time, your treasure, knowing that the more you give yourself away, the more God brings you deeper into his Kingdom. Do this and you'll discover what God has known all the time. When all is said and done your biggest handicaps are really your greatest blessings.

Sound crazy? Well, remember what Helen Keller said, **"I thank God for my handicaps, for through them I have found myself, my work and my God."**

We're all broken, weak and helpless, but because of Jesus we are healed and made stronger. So take your REDEEMED handicaps with you, out there into the mission field where you live, work and play. Look for Bartimaeus in the people and situations you encounter and give them Jesus, so they too can find God in their handicaps, and then pass it on.

Let us pray!