

Revolution

July 3, 2011

Our Gospel story begins just outside the city of Jericho. Jesus and his followers heading to Jerusalem. They have a big week ahead of them, and I am sure a time table to keep. I picture the scenes from the show West Wing, of the President being hurried along by his staff with the rope line there of people wanting to shake his hand and wish him well. So they are hurrying along, through the city, and during all this there is this one guy...a blind beggar, who is identified in the Gospel of Mark as one named Bartimaeus, shouting, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" I can see members of the crowd turning to look at him, "Son of David? Why not just say Jesus, the messiah?!" I mean, this was a political statement. This was a declaration to the world that Baritmaeus thought Jesus was not just a great speaker or wise Rabbi, but THE Messiah, spoken of in prophesy. So they began to try and hush him up. "Quiet there, old man. You are going to get us in trouble. Just wave and cheer. You're going too far." But Bartimaeus wasn't going to be denied, he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"

So Jesus stops dead in his tracks and says to his followers, "Call him here." Well the people around Bartimaeus are surprised, but they say to him, "Take heart;

get up, he is calling you.” Then Jesus said to him, “What do you want me to do for you?” The blind man said to him, “Lord, let me see again.”⁵² Jesus said to him, “Go; your faith has made you well.” Immediately Bartimaeus regained his sight and followed Jesus on the way.

It must have taken a lot for Bartimaeus to cry out like that. His cry said so many things. It was a profession of his faith! He was calling out his belief that Jesus was the foretold Messiah, and he was calling it out for all to hear. Usually, when we hear of a “Calling” in church, we think about God calling to us, but here was the opposite. Here was the person calling to God.

Next in our reading we have a familiar story for anyone who has been through church camp, Zacchaeus, who was a wee little man, and a wee little man was he. Zacchaeus was a tax collector, the type of person we today are comfortable with Jesus associating, but at the time it was a different story. Tax collectors worked for the Roman government, and while they went about their duties, it was assumed that they would skim a bit off the top for their own benefit. So here was a man who had been cheating his neighbors for his own personal profit. Here was a man who should have been concerned with keeping the status quo, it was in his own best interests after all. This should not have been a man seeking out the messiah, and yet there he was. And not only was he there to see Jesus, he wanted to see him so badly, that he climbed up into a sycamore tree to

see what he could see! Zacchaeus may not have cried out "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me" with his voice, but he certainly did so with his actions. By climbing the tree, Zacchaeus, is just as surely saying to Jesus that he believes in him as if he had shouted aloud like Bartimaeus. And once again, Jesus calls out, and once again, the person follows Jesus.

Both Bartimaeus and Zacchaeus reached out with their words and their actions. Both Bartimaeus and Zacchaeus stepped outside of what was acceptable or appropriate for their time; blind beggars did not shout radical statements to Rabbis in the street, and grown men, especially government officials, did not climb trees.

These were bold words and bold moves, and Jesus stepped right up to meet them. Jesus not only acknowledged Bartimaeus' words, but he heals him as well. He not only acknowledges Zacchaeus' actions and desires, he calls him down and goes to his home for dinner. Radical acts, revolutionary acts, that take place, of course, at Jericho, where so long ago the walls had come tumbling down.

I think it is very fitting that we read these stories today, on the day before the celebration of American Independence. You see the Christians of the early church were not placid, quiet people. They were Rebels! Defying Rome, defying the Pharisees, defying the culture of the time. They were a people who would rather

die than abandon their beliefs. And because of their example, because of their loud witness, the truth of Jesus Christ spread and reached all the corners of the globe.

Because, you see, the Gospel of Jesus, the teachings of love and forgiveness that Jesus shared with his disciples was indeed revolutionary. This was not the way things had been done before. This was not the way the Priests and Pharisees had been teaching, this was not the way a man of God was meant to act, and yet, there was Jesus walking off with a tax collector, there was a blind man shouting "Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me!" This was not the way things were done. This was not the way people had been brought up. This was not the way tradition said they should do things. This was a revolution.

A revolution, not with guns, not with armies, but a revolution of ideas and ideals. A revolution in the hearts and minds of the people. A revolution in the understanding of who God is and what our place in the world might be. Jesus walked the Earth, Immanuel, God with us, and eyes were opened, traditions were shaken, and walls came down!

There is a quote on the front of the bulletins from John Adams, which I felt was appropriate for today. In speaking of the American Revolution, he said, "The Revolution was effected before the war commenced. The revolution was in the minds and hearts of the people. This radical change in the principles, opinions, sentiments and affections of the people was the real American Revolution." What

Adams was saying here is that the real revolution had nothing to do with battles and armies, but rather took place in the minds and hearts of the people, who could envision a different world. How odd did it all seem back in those days? They were a mess of colonies, no real organization, no army, and they were going to challenge the mightiest empire in the world, and declare themselves free. This flew in the face of everything that had gone before. Revolution like this had never been attempted on this scale. In spite of what tradition told them, in spite of what their heritage told them, they set out to make a difference and change the world.

Jesus and those who followed him did the exact same thing. In spite of tradition, in spite of dogma, in spite of the way things had always been done, Jesus taught his followers how to make the world a better place, and how to draw closer to each other and to God.

When Jesus saw a man being shunned for his wrongdoings, Jesus spoke out and forgave him. When Jesus saw a friendless, lonely man, Jesus spoke out and invited him to dinner. When Jesus saw a woman about to be put to death, he spoke out against the injustice and saved her life. And when Jesus saw someone crying out for help, he offered comfort, compassion, and healing.

Much of the conflict that Jesus was faced with from the Sadducees and the Pharisees came from his insistence that some of the old rules were not as important as the leaders of the church had always believed. Jesus taught us that forgiveness

was better than vengeance. Jesus taught us that inclusion was better than exclusion, and that while keeping the Sabbath was important, it did not mean we should be callous and withhold healing or aid from those in need. Jesus ate with sinners, forgave sins, and put the weight of his teachings on loving God, not loving the law. All of this flew in the face of all that had gone before, and all that the religious leaders thought was true. Jesus tore down those walls, and when Jesus was crucified and died, the Bible says that the curtain in the temple, the barrier between the people and God was literally torn in two.

And the Christian revolution didn't end there! Paul and the Disciples went all over the known world spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ and God's message of love. Now at first, they had some problems. Peter and Paul argued about who should be welcomed in and what the rules should be for joining, and soon, they realized that following the examples of Christ meant that everyone, Jew and Gentile, Greek and Roman, Man and Woman, Slave and Free, Everyone needed to be welcomed in. Gone were the dietary restrictions and the laws on circumcision. Those walls were torn down so that all might enter into the Body of Christ.

The church has continued to follow the spirit of revolution, changing from time to time as people of vision, guided by the Holy Spirit, sought to bring the church and the world closer to God. Martin Luther, who started the Protestant

reformation. John and Charles Wesley, Jacob Albright, Francis Asbury, Phillip Otterbein, and so many others who through the years helped shape the denominations that would grow into the United Methodist church. A church whose history includes being one of the leaders in the fight against slavery. A moral fight in which both sides claimed that they had scriptural support. People of the day, who had grown up with slavery and saw it as a natural order, saw nothing wrong with using the Bible to support their beliefs, using the Bible to support oppression and exclusion, but today, looking back, we see how foolish that was.

The Methodist church tore down more walls in 1956 when women clergy, after decades of crying out for the same rights and respect given to their male counterparts, finally received full rights and were appointed within the congregations, despite scripture saying that women should not be allowed to talk in church. And in 1968, our church did the right thing by abolishing the all-black Central Jurisdiction allowing Black pastors to be appointed to white congregations and vice-versa, which led to the Desegregation of the Methodist church.

In all these cases there were those screaming that the Bible gave them the authority to keep things the way they were. And in all of those cases, there were people crying out "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me." And the congregations heard their cries, and rules were changed.

We look back and see these issues for the petty bigotries of the past that they are, and yet, as we look ahead, we see similar issues facing the church. Will we have the strength to move forward? Will we have the faith to follow where Christ leads us, day after day? Will we have the courage to open our hearts and open our minds as we open our doors? Or will we remain trapped in our past?

One of my favorite movie quotes comes from the movie Men In Black, a sci-fi movie about government agents chasing aliens. Will Smith's character has just learned that aliens are real and are walking around on Earth, and Tommy Lee Jones says to him, "Fifteen hundred years ago everybody knew the Earth was the center of the universe. Five hundred years ago, everybody knew the Earth was flat, and fifteen minutes ago, you knew that humans were alone on this planet. Imagine what you'll know tomorrow."

60 years ago we knew that it was okay to allow women the same rights as men within the church. 40 years ago we knew that it was alright to break down the barriers of segregation within the church. Imagine what WE will know tomorrow.

When the blind man, Bartimaeus came to Jesus, Jesus said, "What do you want me to do for you?" and Bartimaeus said, "Lord, let me see again." and Jesus said to him "Receive your sight; your faith has saved you."

Let us pray...Lord, your church has seen many wrongdoings and stood against much evil in the world, and yet, our job is still not done. There are still

those who live with oppression, and there are still those who are persecuted both in the church and in our society based on who they are. Lord, don't let us lose this spirit of Revolution that has lived within the church since the beginning. We cry out to you, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" We cry out "Lord, let us see again!" And let us act upon what we see. In your name we pray, Amen!