

# Bold Faith

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*Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)  
October 28, 2018*

*Text: Mark 10:46-52*

I'm grieving this morning, for a congregation that gathered yesterday much like we have today, to pray, to hear the scriptures, to praise the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. We call our places of worship "sanctuaries," and we take it for granted that because they are sacred spaces, set apart for a special purpose, they are safe and protected, and they ought to be. But yesterday the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh suffered the deadliest attack on a Jewish community in the history of this country, when a gunman took eleven lives before being taken into custody. Our Jewish brothers and sisters know all too well what it is to be targeted with threats and violence, whether it's a swastika sprayed on a wall or a deadly attack like this one. The gunman in this attack seems to have believed the most recent variations on the old and all too familiar lies about wealthy Jews conspiring against the country they live in. These lies have deadly consequences, and as people called not to bear false witness against our neighbors, we have a corresponding duty to speak up when others tell lies about them.

The name of the congregation, Tree of Life, comes from scripture. In the book of Proverbs, we read, "The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, but violence takes lives away" (11:30). We are called not simply to refrain from violence ourselves, but to lead lives that bear fruit for peace, that protect the safety and dignity of our neighbors. This is a good time to reach out to your Jewish friends and neighbors, and it is always a good time to speak out, when you hear untruths in the media, on the lips of public officials, or among your neighbors and friends that have the potential to be seeds of violence. As a follower of the Prince of Peace, look for opportunities to stand up for shalom.

One of the ways we can do this involves listening to those in our communities and our society at large who are hurting. It's all too natural to want to silence cries of pain, as the crowd tried to do to Bartimaeus in today's lesson, but Jesus shows us how to make room to hear the voices of those who long for wholeness, as well as their faith and hope, in a way that heals us all.

I was listening to this advice call-in show recently, and there was a question from this woman who was recently divorced. All my friends keep asking me the same question, she said, and that is: "What happened?" She felt the circumstances leading to the end of her marriage were incredibly personal, and she felt comfortable sharing them with a few close friends, but for the rest, she wondered, why do they want to know? And how can I politely make them understand that I just don't want to get into it?

Have you ever found yourself asking someone you know, "What happened?" Maybe it wasn't someone recently divorced. Maybe it was someone telling you about a serious medical diagnosis, or the loss of a job. I know I've done it myself and gotten a polite but firm brush-off. And it was eye-opening to hear the response to this woman's question from a clinical psychologist, who explained that when something bad happens to someone else, it makes us feel vulnerable, and we start asking ourselves, "Could it happen to me too? Could my marriage fall apart? Could I get sick?" And so sometimes

we ask, “What happened?” because we want to discover that the other person made a mistake, or that their circumstances are very different from ours, so that this calamity that has befallen them can’t possibly happen to us too. Oftentimes this question comes from a need for reassurance that comes from separating ourselves, standing apart from someone who’s going through a tough time, instead of standing with them. We want to be able to tell ourselves a story that goes like this: “You may not be OK, but I am. This bad thing happened to you, but it’s not going to happen to me.” Whether or not we say it out loud, there’s always part of us that wants to silence the voices around us (and inside us) that cry out in pain.

When I read the gospel lesson this week, it made me think of that woman and her nosy friends. Bartimaeus knows all too well that he needs healing, that he needs Jesus, and he’s not afraid to ask for it... loudly! All around them are people trying to silence him. They’re embarrassed by him. Maybe rather than listening to him, they’ve written his story—he’s a beggar, after all, and so here he is, they think, shamelessly trying to hit up the visiting rabbi for a handout.

Or maybe—and this is a slightly more charitable thought—maybe they feel guilty, because they remember what the scriptures say about the existence of poor and needy people. This story takes place on the outskirts of Jericho, where God’s people entered the promised land. And so perhaps there were some among them who remembered what the law of Moses says about the poor: “There will... be no one in need among you, because the Lord is sure to bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you..., if only you will obey the Lord your God by diligently observing this entire commandment that I command you today” (Deuteronomy 15:4-5). In other words, if there is someone who is poor and needy among us, it’s because we have sinned, because we have fallen short, because we, collectively, have failed to obey God. So maybe guilt is appropriate... But then instead of bringing Bartimaeus to Jesus, instead of standing together with him and confessing to Jesus that this man is the symptom-bearer of their collective guilt, instead of asking Jesus to heal the man and forgive them all, they shush him and try to push him away. Maybe they think that if they pretend the poor, blind beggar doesn’t exist, they won’t have to admit or address their own need for grace and healing.

But, God bless him, Bartimaeus won’t be silent. When they shush him, he only gets louder and louder: “Son of David, have mercy on me!” And at last he succeeds: Jesus stops in his tracks and calls him over.

I want to call attention to what Jesus does for Bartimaeus, because I think it’s key to understanding our own call to embody Jesus’ grace as a church and in our individual lives as his disciples. Jesus doesn’t write a story for Bartimaeus. He doesn’t make assumptions about what he needs. Jesus simply asks him, “What do you want me to do for you?” It’s a question that creates the space for Bartimaeus to name what troubles him and ask for healing. “My teacher,” he says, “let me see again.” It’s in that space Jesus creates that Bartimaeus is able to give voice to his longing, and to express his faith and hope that Jesus can meet it. Bartimaeus’s faith is inseparable from his longing for healing. Where others try to silence him for their own self-serving reasons, Jesus honors his voice, recognizes his faith, and gives that faith healing power.

There are any number of people in our lives that cry out. Women cry out about the violence done to their bodies and dignity. People of color cry out about the disproportionate burden our justice system places on their backs. Your friends and neighbors cry out with grief over losses they’ve suffered, over ongoing hurts and frustrations in their bodies and relationships. And each of these cries calls forth a sense of vulnerability and anxiety in us, doesn’t it? But what would it look like if we resisted

the urge to rewrite their stories, or to figure out what's different about them in order to make ourselves feel safe? What would it look like for us to ask instead, "What is it I can do for you?"

May God call you to the bold faith we see in this story. When you experience hurt and longing, may you cry out like Bartimaeus, refusing to be silenced. And when you hear these cries, may you trust in the transforming power of God to heal not only the brokenness of others, but the hurt you carry within you as well. May we all hear Jesus' voice speaking to us, "Your faith has made you well." Amen.