

Sermon, 29 October 2006—Proper 25
“On Mutual Ministry”

Isaiah 59:9-19; Psalm 13; Hebrews 5:12—6:1,9-12; Mark 10:46-52

In the Gospel according to Mark, the healing of Bartimaeus is the crown of Jesus’ public ministry. Jesus is in Jericho, his last stop before he enters Jerusalem on a donkey as a crowd waves palm fronds around him and shouts “Hosanna!” For Mark, this is the last opportunity to receive Jesus’ message, so he makes this story an exemplary story. Here, finally, Jesus finds his perfect follower. The twelve he picked have understood neither Jesus nor themselves; they are still with him, which is something to their credit, but they will not rally around him for long, and they will cave when the combined institutional opposition of Empire and Temple becomes apparent. Bartimaeus, however, blind as he is, recognizes Jesus and what Jesus can offer; he knows his own need; he refuses to be cowed; he leaves everything behind for the gift only Jesus can give; and, being given his vision, he then follows the one who has given him life and health. He knows, in other words, what is possible and what is essential. What is possible? A new life, full of strength and vision, in the company of the one who evoked courage and hope in him. What is essential? His own desire for sight and Jesus’ benevolent gracious power. As Mark sees it, Bartimaeus is each one of us, every follower of Jesus, at our best.

This is my first sermon with you now that I have moved to Saint Cloud. I have been touched by the warmth and encouragement and genuine help that I have received during this transition. I have been very aware of my needs and equally aware of the many hands outstretched to help me land as easily as possible—I am very grateful. What is *essential* in all this is our

investment in each other; what is *possible* is our growth together, learning from each other to walk with courage and hope, with strength and vision.

So I want, today, to speak about the ministry we share here—our mutual ministry. We will live into this ministry together in two stages. First, as you know, comes an exploratory period of 18 to 24 months, during which we will in our own way be asking God to help us see. We will be calling out to each other and to God with courage and hope, while we strive to determine if our being together makes it possible for us to know Christ more deeply and follow him more closely. Second, if we discern that it is God's will that we continue together as fellow pilgrims, because the strength and vision of a life lived as followers of Jesus opens up ahead of us, then we will pledge to each other that we will share ministry in Saint Cloud, so the mission of the Church can be carried out here, which is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.

So what is before us is the initial work of wondering what is possible and what is essential for each one of us and for all of us together. Both of these—the essential and the possible—are important. For Bartimaeus, the possibility before him was to receive his sight, to walk as a free and unencumbered man, to become one of the fellowship of those whose lives have been ransomed by the Son of God. He knew that the arrival of the Messiah, the appearance of the Son of David, brought with it the fulfillment of promises: not only would the blind see, but the lame would walk, the deaf would hear, the dead would be restored to life, and those who have nothing would hear good news. The prophets had proclaimed these to be the signs of the presence of the Promised One. Everything Bartimaeus had heard about Jesus led him to believe that the restoration of his sight was possible now in the presence of this carpenter from Nazareth and descendant of David.

Now I want to underscore that Bartimaeus's sense of the possibility available to him was not some private preference having to do with a hankering after comforts to which he might have claimed himself entitled. What awoke his sense of the possible was that, of all the promises in the glorious retinue of hope that accompanies the presence of God, one applied directly to him: sight given to the blind. He calls out for what God has already pledged; he claims the gift God has already offered; he clamors for God's presence to be known as God had said it would be.

We chatter some times that the gifts of God, as acts of grace, are free gifts, given to us freely. They are free in the sense that we can do nothing to merit them, nothing to produce them, nothing to demand them. Because God dotes on us like a besotted lover, gifts sprout up and pour down and spread abroad in our life—oh, if we had eyes to see them; oh, if we ourselves were not blind!

But there *is* a sense in which these gifts are not free. They are not ours to hoard. To the extent that they are signs of the presence of God in our life, they exist only as we proclaim them, only as we witness to them, only as we give public thanks for them and distribute them among those hungry to know that God is present. In fact, these blessings are given to us so that our lives might be signs for others of God's mighty acts. All the blessings we receive are given to us in trust to be used for the good of the community in which we find ourselves. I do not mean only financial matters—of course generosity there is crucial. I mean our physical strength, our abilities and talents, our neighbors and families, our very breath and blood—all these are given to us without merit, and they shrivel if we clutch them. Beyond that, though, every wave of hope and joy, every impulse to forgive, every insight into compassion, every time the taproot of our soul touches the deep

wellspring of peace—all these gifts, which cannot be artificially produced, but which are promised to the faithful, wither if we uproot them to admire them (and ourselves!) in the crystal vase of our psyche. They are only given to us in order to build together the household of God, to strengthen and encourage all its members, and even the stranger who arrives unbidden.

So Bartimaeus, in calling out for his sight, is also offering himself to be a sign of the arrival of the Reign of God in the midst of his community. He is submitting to being the public evidence, the sign in the village square, the object of gossip and speculation for the glory of God. To the end of his days, his physical ability to see will not be a sensory self-indulgence of his own, but the occasion for those around him to see—and they will see in him the residue of the presence of God. His neighbors will be able to whisper that, once again, in their day, God’s mighty arm was outstretched to save, and *they saw it!* So how could they not also follow Christ, praising God?

So here we also sit by the side of the road, hopefully alert to what is possible for us. If we believe in God, whose power to restore and empower is clear throughout Scripture, then we can call for God’s mighty acts to be known in us. We can ask for reconciliation and healing and power and grace, not because those things make our life easier, but because then we will become signs of the presence of God in Saint Cloud. We can pray for the ability to see and heal and forgive and love, not because we will then be virtuous, but because then others will know that we are instruments attune to God’s purposes. We can work for growth, not because we want to float our financial boat, but because the presence of others arriving with their own anxious hopes reflects back to us the serene gracious bounty of God here among us, who turns a few loaves into a banquet and strangers into brothers and sisters. The blessing of the Christian is to become a channel of blessing

for others, and to be talked about and pointed out by those who hardly dare believe it is true, but who come to believe because of what they see in us.

You could have expected me to say all that. The dawn of any new mutual ministry is a time of far reaching, outspreading, horizon-cresting possibilities. That is why it is also always a dangerous time. If everything and anything is possible, why not expect it all? Why shouldn't Bartimaeus have asked for any number of other blessings? What limit could ever be found in God, whose pockets are infinitely deep?

This is where Bartimaeus shows us, not only what is possible within the promises and purposes of God, but how to ask for what is *essential*. As Jesus said to Martha, overstressed and resentful that Mary was sitting at his feet while she struggled to prepare a meal, "only one thing is needful." That exercise of simplification and discernment must always go with our sense of what is possible. Yes, all things are possible, but what is essential?

Bartimaeus knows what is essential: his share in the showing forth of the presence of God is restored vision. For someone else, it will be some other form of healing; for others, it will be forgiveness, either received or given; for others, it will be the power to speak, either to protest or to comfort or to proclaim or to sing; for others, courage; for others, compassion; for others, peace. I cannot speculate how many years of sitting by the side of the road it took for Bartimaeus to know that, when his time was at hand, when God's power was present to him and in him, his duty to himself and to God was to ask to *see*; but by the time Jesus walked past, Bartimaeus knew what was essential. So he calls out, he yells and screams—no, he howls and shrieks—because this is the moment; it is at hand, now! People around him try to shut him up, but he cannot be true to himself or to God if he doesn't roar at the top of his lungs what is the core of his need. He is our example.

Now, I am not talking about our becoming children in supermarkets, who need cookies in one aisle, until they need ice cream in another. It takes years for us to understand what the one essential thing for us is, either individually or as a community. The one thing needful, the essential thing, is what, on your deathbed, will cause you despair and grief or gratitude and peace—irreparable despair and choking grief if you neglected or postponed it, spreading gratitude and settled peace if you accomplished it or provided for it. So when there is no time left, what will you most have wanted to have done? How could Bartimaeus have survived, knowing that he let pass by the one who restores sight? Who could doze by the side of the road until the dust of what passed them by settles over them and chokes them?

Bartimaeus knew that for him sight was the essential thing, the thing for which he would endure any shame and social awkwardness, any physical and psychological effort. He understood the essential thing whose time is now. When the crowd finally turns to him and says, “Jesus is ready for you,” Bartimaeus throws off his cloak and springs up. He leaves behind the makeshift and make-do; he drops what he has used to make a living and leaps towards what he longs for. He recognizes the moment and hurls himself towards the essential thing—his sight—as towards his deepest beloved, the hidden hope of his heart that raised him up each day. And you also, individually and corporately carry a buried kernel that yearns to open into the sunlight and bear fruit, rather than to go down to the dust desiccated.

So for us here, what is possible must be guided by what is essential. I must ask myself what for me is essential to my being here: what, given my skills and temperament, is the gift only I can make here—the gift my heart tells me I have been waiting to make? And together we must ask what for Saint John’s Episcopal Church is essential to our being in Saint Cloud: what,

given the skills and temperament of this congregation, individually and corporately, is the gift that only this community can make?

This work of discernment is tricky. We are seduced by what we think ought to be, by what we tell ourselves we should be doing, by our notions of the way churches are supposed to look and act. It is a subtle temptation, to turn away from what we are and what we have been given, to try to fulfill a demand present only in our fantasy or in our nostalgia—but it is always the devil’s trick to turn you away from reality into dreams. Instead, the more humble search, the life-giving search, is for the essential hope, the promise God has given us by making us as we are and placing us where we are. Because we dare to ask for what is essential to *us*, we find that our ability to act increases in power, because it is truer to us and if it is truer to us, it becomes our particular testimony to the bounty and blessing of God, who made all things good and gazes at them with love.

So we must ask ourselves what is possible for us together, knowing that what is possible is what has always been possible to the children of God—healing and forgiveness, reconciliation and joy, courage and peace, compassion and justice—and that these things are already given to us, but only given to us to the extent that we are willing to be the public signs of God’s restoring power. And we must ask ourselves, given all that is possible, what is essential, knowing that what is essential is the gift that only we can deliver in the end, the gift that it would break our heart not to make. This work will prepare us to let everything go back into the hands of God when the time comes for us to depart and to have nothing left over but praise, so that we will be ready to enter in and take our place in the heavenly choirs, who sing the praise of God for all eternity, who is Eternal Source, and Only-begotten Word, and Life-giving Spirit, one God now and forever.