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Today we remember our Reformed heritage- the American Presbyterian Church grows out of the Church of Scotland.

We remember the saints who lived and died in the faith and those born anew through Baptism this past year.

We recall the teachings of Jesus and the commandments of God. For if we do not understand our history, we will lack vision for the present and future.

Proverbs 3 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) Admonition to Trust and Honor God

3 My child, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments; ²for length of days and years of life and abundant welfare they will give you. ³Do not let loyalty and faithfulness forsake you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart. ⁴So you will find favor and good repute in the sight of God and of people. ⁵Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight.

⁶In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.

Today we pick up our reading with the disciples following with Jesus to Jerusalem and they come to Jericho- a town that evokes another Jesus or in Hebrew- Jeshua or Joshua. Unlike Joshua and the Battle of Jericho- God will not take this town by force. No walls will come a tumblin' down. The new Jeshua, Jesus, Son of God, Son of David, will take this world by mercy and saving grace. Hear now this salvation story.

Mark 10:46-52

10:46 They came to Jericho. As Jesus and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside.

10:47 When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, Bartimaeus began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

10:48 Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but Bartimaeus cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"

10:49 Jesus stood still and said, "Call him here." And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart; get up, he is calling you."

10:50 So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus.

10:51 Then Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" The blind man said to him, "My teacher, let me see again."

10:52 Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." Immediately Bartimaeus regained his sight and followed Jesus on the way.

Proclamation of the Word

At first glance we hear a story today of a blind man receiving sight. But maybe it is more about the deaf hearing and the sighted gaining vision.

Blind Bartimaeus is what we traditionally call him- as if he is defined by his disability. Mark tells us he is a blind beggar. Blind people had no other option. Begging was the Social Security system in that time. And good Jews needed to give alms to the poor. It worked. But upon further reading, when Jesus and his disciples walk by, it is not healing of sight that Bartimaeus is crying out for at all. When Bartimaeus hears Jesus is in town he shouts out and begins crying, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Of all the problems in the world today, I never hear anyone say, "We have too much mercy!"ⁱ When I ask someone, "How is it with your soul, friend?" I never hear anyone complain because people are just too merciful and kind. Sure, we practice mercy all the time...the person who gets on your last nerve, the roommate with whom you are very patient. Our church is involved in many mercy ministries near and far. In fact, we have sent disciples on 44 medical missions where hundreds have had their sight restored. We try to practice mercy toward others and hopefully ourselves, but we do not seem to have a mercy problem- maybe a lack of mercy problem.

Pope Francis declared 2016 the Year of Mercy, but Lord knows, I think it takes most of us a lifetime to really understand and practice mercy. Nobody is pushing mercy. No Corporation has Mercy as a core value or part of its mission statement. It just doesn't sell. In a week of pipe bombs, death of a SC police officer, and tragically, a synagogue shooting yesterday killing 11, mercy is much needed. I have had people say they cannot be Presbyterian anymore because we are too merciful. The church cares too much about the poor, people of other faiths, LGBTQ folks, and refugees. The church is too merciful. But Jesus said, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy." (Matthew 5:7) We can be just like those disciples who are blind and deaf to Jesus' mission of mercy.

Bartimaeus will not let us off the hook. He is sitting right here where we cannot ignore him, on the side of the road where we cannot pass by without hearing his cries. Sometimes like the disciples who shoosh him and try to silence him, we want to roll up the window and look away or get the beggars off the street. That is exactly what happened in 1996 when we lived in Atlanta. It was the year Atlanta hosted the Summer Olympics. The optics were not good for the city, all the homeless folks, so lots of one way bus tickets were handed out.

It is amazing how Scripture comes to life. This scenario is exactly what happened last Sunday. After worship, I arrived late to the new member class, our Discovering Faith lunch. Kate came in and said there is a woman on the side of the road who is asking for money. She said, "I don't have money, but we can go pray with her." We just talked about this in PSA. So a few of us first went to the Kitchen where we keep individual bags of food with information about the hours for Clemson Community Care. Someone else made her a plate of food. We met the woman there who was holding a sign begging just in time for the Edgewood avenue church traffic going by. She was using a cane and appeared to not

speak English. I told her about Clemson community care and asked her to come back when we could help her with resources. She seemed to understand. We did not ask her to leave, but we did not invite her in either.

Every time we are confronted with a person begging for help, we are put in a position to respond. Once you have seen someone, you cannot un-see them. And once you have heard their cry for help, you cannot un-hear it. I usually feel guilty or conflicted about what we can and cannot do. Every situation is different. I wrestle with the questions we all have...the skepticism of her being strategically placed on the side of the road for the church crowd, wondering could she really speak English or if the cane was real? On the other hand, an offer to come back at a time that did not leave others waiting, seemed considerate. The offer of food and water, a small help, and finding a time that we could really attend to her needs made sense.

We are all confronted by these situations. We can ignore, look away, shoosh people, or judge. Or as we do in this church, some of the money placed in the offering plates goes to support those local ministries where we collectively care for our neighbors. But sometimes that person shows up when one of us is on the way out the door to a meeting, a hospital visit, a luncheon, and it is hard to take care of them when you have others waiting on you.

Today we read how the disciples try to keep Bartimaeus from bothering Jesus. Jesus had places to go, Jerusalem, in fact. It was not on the day's agenda to heal a blind man. The Disciples are the spiritually blind ones here. And not only blind, but deaf to Jesus' teaching.

St. Francis of Assisi said that when we see a beggar, he should remind us that we are put on this earth to be generous, not to live for ourselves, but to care for God's children in need.

In our Reformed tradition today we remember that Martin Luther said that beggars should remind us all of our spiritual state. Our souls are impoverished, and we all are in need of God's mercy.

The word "mercy" has special significance in the Orthodox tradition. They pray the "Jesus Prayer." "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." This is the way in which we approach the Savior in our neediness, blindness, and sin. We acknowledge who he is and who we are. He is the Lord, the Savior, and we are beggars. He is the all-powerful Messiah, and we need mercy.

Mercy- it is what Bartimaeus wants. He does not cry out for Jesus to heal his blindness first, but wants mercy. At the Open Door Community in Atlanta, a ministry of hospitality to homeless folks, taught me some things. My friends Ira and Adolphus, formerly homeless men living in community taught me about how to treat homeless neighbors.ⁱⁱ

1. Speak to the person with compassion and respect.

2. Ask their name and introduce yourself. Bartimaeus had a name. He was Timaeus' son, a child of God.
3. Be a good listener. Hear their story. Ask if you can share yours.
4. A humble attitude is a must.
5. Stay away from problem solving.
6. Never tell them what they need to do, but let them know of some resources.
7. Keep it simple.
8. Encourage.
9. Do it for Jesus who comes in the guise of the stranger. How we treat the "least of these" is how we treat Jesus.

Those are good ideas for how we treat anyone- a person with whom we differ, a person who supports a different political candidate, or a close friend. Bartimaeus was Timaeus' son. Everyone is someone's son or daughter, a person who deserves respect, kindness, mercy.

When we really listen, usually the other person has something to teach us- or God can teach us through them. Bartimaeus teaches us some things. First, we shouldn't shut people up who are crying out for mercy. And secondly, he shows us how to be a disciple. Bartimaeus leaps up to follow Jesus. Jesus calls him. He heals his blindness and sends him on his way, but Bartimaeus is saved and changed. He leaps up and throws off his cloak- following right after Jesus.

I wonder what things we need to throw off to in order to leap up and follow Jesus?

What holds us back?

Is it our fear, need for security, lack of compassion? Are we too busy? Do we have too much stuff to take care of? Do we work too many hours? Do we just not care?

What do you need to throw off to rise up and follow Jesus?

Remember the guys we read about last week. They demonstrate what needs to be thrown off. James and John want to be in Jesus' cabinet- to sit on his right and his left in glory. Jesus says whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. (Mark 10:43-44) James and John need to throw off their ambition and self-importance. They don't really get it.

And before James and John, Jesus encounters the Rich Young man. In order to follow Jesus, he tells the man he must sell everything and give it all to the poor. (Mark 10:17-22) The man's riches were his idol. He needed to throw off that cloak in order to come and follow. The primary purpose of giving is not that God would get the money out of our pockets, but that God would get the idols out of our hearts. But the rich young man goes away sad. He does not really get it.

Bartimaeus- he gets it. He is the most faithful disciple- leaping up and throwing off his cloak to follow Jesus in gratitude. He gets it. He is the last that becomes first in the Kingdom of God because he knows he needs mercy.

Before Bartimaeus does that, Jesus says, “Go. Your faith has made you well.” God’s mercy is what makes all things well. In the town of Jericho, where Joshua and God’s people landed before entering the Promised Land, we meet Bartimaeus. And the key to well-ness, salvation, peace and promise, seems at the root of all things to be about MERCY.

We live in contentious times, made challenging by the ways evil seeks to divide us and draw us away from God's intentions for the world. Our faith becomes thin when we cannot talk about hard and important things. Or we are frozen in fear and cannot respond. Just as we have responded to hurricane victims in recent weeks, the church has sent Disaster funds to our Christian partners on the Guatemala border because there is a humanitarian crisis. They are ready to respond to people in need of food, hydration, and basic medical care. If we allowed partisan politics to get in the way of Jesus' call to be merciful, then we are truly deaf and blind to God's purposes.

We need to remember the mercy of Jesus. Blessed are the merciful, for you shall receive mercy, but he Jesus also warned us...

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. (Matthew 23:23)

Jesus does not take Jerusalem by force, but by calling us to follow him in an uprising of mercy. Then perhaps our ears will hear again, and our eyes be cleared so that even those of us who have sight, might catch a vision of God’s kingdom. So, we choose mercy.

ⁱ Grateful for the reflections of James Howell at his blog James Howells Weekly Preaching Notions. Much of the intro is thanks to his words, jameshowellsweeklypreachingnotions.blogspot.com/

ⁱⁱ Adapted from a newspaper written by persons without homes.