

Proper 25, Year B

- My grandpa was blind
- Lost his sight in a workplace accident in adulthood, so wasn't born blind
- Had to re-learn how to do just about everything after losing sight
- Ham radio operator, very active in his UMC, owned a woodshop (and modified tools himself), and cooked for himself quite a bit, including after my grandmother died and he was at home alone
- Lived to age 90 - heard story at funeral - showed up to church one day and power was out
- Pastor had to tell everyone to go home, but grandpa said not to cancel services - that he would usher - even joked that the blind leading the blind was biblical
- Good-natured and sense of humor about everything - but also he got something that the rest of the church didn't seem to
- It wasn't just that the dark didn't bother him - genuinely think he would have done it, if they'd let him - it was like he knew something the rest of us didn't - he knew it was that important to have the service - to worship God - he wasn't gonna let a little thing like the lights being out get in the way of that
- I tell you this story on this day when we hear the Gospel story of the healing of Bartimaeus, a man who was blind and a beggar - because I hope that perhaps my grandfather can help us all understand something important about this story - something that I think it's easy for all those of us who aren't blind to miss
- And that is just how easy it is to read this story in a way that's wrong, a way that's damaging and harmful
- It seems especially important to talk about the ways we can misread Scripture in a way that distorts, that warps our worldview - especially important, that is, in light of the events yesterday at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, where 11 people were horrifically killed during worship
- It weighs on me that so much of the history of anti-Semitism has begun with Christian thought - that so many Christians throughout history have managed to read Scripture in a way that they think means they should look down on, or even hate, our elder siblings in the faith - as the Jewish people are sometimes called
- But that may be a discussion for another day - perhaps when the wounds are so fresh, the tragedy isn't so raw
- For now, perhaps all we can do is weep and scream and mourn when we think of the

horror that one act has wrought - and know that God does so right along with us

- But for today, perhaps, we should return to Bartimaeus - You may be wondering just what I mean when I say it's easy to misread this story, to let it misshape our view of the world
- When a person with sight comes across this tale, they tend to make one of three different assumptions, and I'll just sort of have to tackle these one by one so I hope you'll bear with me
- First - while this is hopefully much less common than it once was, some people still view illness or disability as somehow a consequence of sin - even disciples did - consider healing of the man blind from birth in John 9 - disciples ask, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?'
 - We aren't always quite so overt, but it's still all too possible for some people to see anything less than their ideal of full health and wellness as a sign of sin, or of God's disfavor - think that if God heals, then any lack of healing must somehow be God's will
 - Think people can or should be able to pray their way to wellness - just isn't how it works in an imperfect world - God can and does heal, but that doesn't mean that when God doesn't it's because people don't deserve it
- The second assumption that people can sometimes have is that people with disabilities appearing in the Gospels are there as something like objects for the demonstration of God's power (can't help but note here that of all the people living w/ disability in Scripture, Bartimaeus is the only one actually named)
 - With man blind from birth, Jesus answers disciples, 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.'
 - We tend to read that as though it means that this man was born blind so that Christ's healing could show forth God's healing work...
 - But what might it mean if instead we read it as saying that God's works are revealed in that man born blind, just as they are in all of us? That that man was there with the disciples and then in the Gospel as living proof that the fact that we bear the image of God does not depend on our abilities?
 - Were it not for the witness of that man born blind, in other words, we could think that somehow sight was an important part of God's works showing through us - but because of his example we know that sight is not a requirement for citizenship in the kingdom of God - that no ability is a requirement for citizenship in the

kingdom of God

- And then the third assumption we can make based on healing stories like this in Scripture is the assumption that the chief concern of people living with disabilities is getting rid of their disability
 - That's true for Bartimaeus in this story - when Jesus asks what Bartimaeus wants Jesus to do for him, his answer is to make it so he can see - probably has a lot to do with society at the time, which wouldn't let Bartimaeus really be a part of things - he was relegated to the margins, forced to beg for his money - so it's entirely possible that his request for healing his sight was based upon how keenly society forced him to feel its loss
 - And while we still too often marginalize people living w/ disabilities, it simply isn't true that their chief concern would always be getting rid of their disability
 - If my grandfather encountered Christ and Jesus asked him what he wanted Jesus to do for him, I'm just not sure that my grandfather's first thought would've been to ask for it back - maybe it would've been, but he just never seemed to me to really feel the lack - but it's important to realize that was just his experience
- So if these are all wrong assumptions, then what's the good way, the non-harmful way to read it?
- I think it's this: Bartimaeus was a person, just like any of us - with all the complications, all the traits that made him unique and special, and bearing the full image of God
- When he encountered God, he recognized it - he called out to Jesus, the Son of David, for mercy
- And when the opportunity to draw closer to God in Christ presented itself, he let nothing get in his way - he threw off his cloak - and as a beggar at the time he definitely didn't have any shelter of his own, so he threw off the one thing that he had to keep him warm - possibly his only but almost certainly his most important possession - and in so doing, he was healed
- If most of us were to look at Bartimaeus, we'd probably be likely to define him as somehow lacking something we considered essential, something we can't imagine doing without - I know this because it's the way people tended to look at my grandpa
- Wouldn't it be incredible if we could fight against those instincts of ours, past them, and come to know the whole person the way that God knows them - as our fellow citizens of the kingdom of God - fully loved, just as God made them

- Because, by God, if we could do that, who knows how much we'd come to learn about each other and about ourselves
- Perhaps that way we, like Bartimaeus, would be able to cast off what weighs us down, and follow Christ on the way