

## “WHAT IF...THE POWER OF FAITH”

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Text: Mark 10: 46-52

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I like to read mysteries and adventure stories. Anything from Ludlum to Mary Higgins Clark to John Grisham is a good way to end a day. It might seem surprising but the Bible can be approached as a good mystery. For instance, the writer of Mark had before him a multiplicity of incidents involving Jesus' life. Some he had heard; others were written manuscripts, probably not in chronological order. His task was to assemble these stories into one powerful narrative of the Master's life.

The first mystery arises as we consider how the writer organized the material in Mark 10. He had heard two stories, one of two disciples asking for special favors which we looked at last week, the other dealing with a blind man seeking assistance. Why did he choose to place them back-to-back?

Let's look more closely at the stories in order to get some answers. Jesus in both accounts in Mark 10 asked the same question: "What do you want me to do for you?" James and John, as we saw last week, wanted nothing less than to have places of honor at the right and left hand of Jesus in the coming Kingdom. Lots of people today tend to see Jesus as one who will do something special for them personally and make them better than other people.

Bartimaeus, as was the custom, was placed by the side of the road each day in order to beg from travelers. His request was much more humble and basic. He simply wanted his sight so that he could get on with daily life. It's interesting that the text says that Bartimaeus became a follower of "The Way," the earliest designation of those who modeled their lives around Christ. On the other hand, James and John along with the rest of the disciples, our Lord's closest friends, fled as soon as he was arrested. Mark's morale is obvious: the Christian faith is not about elitism and grandeur but rather about humility and service. He put the two incidents together in order to point out the true meaning of faith.

Another part of the mystery emerges as we realize that Mark was written 30-40 years after the death of Jesus. What did the writer intend to be the message for the early Church? Clearly Mark was concerned about the spiritual blindness of the original faith community. The Church, like James and John, did not fully understand its mission and, of course, the same is true today. It's tempting as we saw last week in talking about discipleship to think in terms of what Jesus can do for us and he can do a great deal but always there is a component of service in our activities in the Church. Always there is a cross, a suffering servant, one person giving his life for many, as a model for all of us.

Thus, Mark was hoping that in contrasting the two stories that it would help to lead the Christian community out of its limited vision into a new appreciation for its calling. Looking at the cross as we do every Sunday opens our eyes and removes the blindness so that we truly see life with Christ-colored glasses.

Now the third part of the mystery concerns 2006. Suppose we, like Bartimaeus, really could SEE and each day became a partnership with our Creator. What would be the result of gaining such spiritual sight?

You may know of Dr. Robert Schuler, who still is on TV and famous for the Crystal Cathedral in California. I confess that I have not been a great fan of Dr. Schuler. His comments often seem far too simplistic. For instance, in one of his books, "Power Thoughts" he writes about the battle between David and Goliath in these terms: the Israelites were saying, "He's so big, we can't win" while David the shepherd boy said, "He so big, I can't miss." Life is a little more complex than that but in that same book he keeps making the point about the power of faith and how we need to expect more from trusting in the Almighty. That got me to thinking about our text.

What if there is a power in our faith that we haven't taken seriously enough? Peter Jennings of ABC TV pointed out that camera crews descend soon after an earthquake, riot, storm or crash so the news can get on TV quickly. Invariably, he says, a reporter sticks a microphone in a survivor's face and asks: "How did you get through this terrible experience?" Often the survivor replies: "I just prayed and without God's help I don't think I could have made it." Jennings say at that point there usually is an awkward moment of silence and then the reporter asks another question that, even if they don't come right out and say it goes something like this: "Now, that's very nice but what really got you through this ordeal?"

Jennings suggests that there is a huge gap between what the media presents and the attitudes of people when it comes to the power of faith. Interestingly, ABC subsequently hired a reporter to deal with the religious side of news stories and the Rochester paper has done the same. Can it be that in our secular world we have become inured to the possibilities of our faith?

I've been thinking about that question the last few weeks. Certainly the men with whom I was on retreat earlier this month, all recovering alcoholics, have stories about what God has done in their lives. Indeed, they would say that without a Higher Power they would have been lost forever. Perhaps we who may not have had such powerful religious experiences as those in AA tend to be too skeptical in considering what God can do in our lives individually and as a church. If this congregation had been asked not so long ago: Can we double the peace offering while oversubscribing a work trip to New Orleans there would have been doubts; if we had been asked can we help rehab a house for Habitat, send four people to New Orleans and 14 people to the Binghamton area for disaster relief and get acquainted with Randall Shea from Guatemala while maintaining a strong worship and education ministry there would have been skeptics. Yet isn't that exactly what has happened this Fall and should not credit be given to God for moving us forward? I'd like to suggest that we take more seriously the time of joys and concerns each Sunday. Of course, not all our prayers are answered but still there is a power that radiates out when "two or three" gather to seek God's help. I always have said in my ministry that the greatest miracles are not people suddenly recovering but rather it is the strength, hope and courage that God has given to individuals and families that has enabled them to move through "the valley of the shadow."

What would happen this week if we lived as though the power of Christ were very much a part of our lives? I'm speaking of more than just praying but a whole way of life. Thomas More certainly was right when he said, "**The things, good Lord, that we pray for, give the grace to labor for.**" We definitely have a role in the healing process, whatever that means in a particular situation. Instead of thinking of all the reasons why something can't be done, maybe we need to be more aware of the power possibilities in our lives that could result from combining faith and action. If our efforts don't work that's o.k. because God is there to give us new opportunities.

I hope you haven't heard this story. A little girl at a carnival bumped into an adult friend who observed that the child had a huge mass of cotton candy on a paper cone. Noting her size and the size of the cone, the man asked, "How can a little girl like you eat all that cotton candy?" Delightedly, the child answered, "Well, you see, I'm really much bigger on the inside than I am on the outside!"

Isn't this an important part of Jesus' message? There is much more to us on the inside than normally shows on the outside. Could it be that we, like Bartimaeus, are not really seeing all that there is to see in life and that our faith in Christ could make much more of a difference?