

Mark 10:46-52 They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" 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." So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. 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." Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

It's A Mystery

There was a story online that goes like this: "Thrusting an armful of grocery bags onto the kitchen counter, I glanced over my shoulder and saw two messages scrawled on a napkin near the phone. From the penmanship, I guessed they were written by my youngest. The note read, "Mrs. Kostal called about picking up greenery and someone called about llamas. Perplexed, I tried to jar my memory. Llamas, what llamas? I knew I ordered pine roping from the Boy Scouts, but had I also ordered llamas for the holidays? I'm a busy mom, but even I would remember placing an order for spitting animals. Sometime later, I realized that my son had taken a call about Lamaze—not llamas. Mystery solved. Cancel the order for Purina Llama Chow. Whew!"

Yet Job's story today leaves his mystery unresolved - the mystery of why good people suffer. Job is a righteous man - even God says so - yet God gives Satan the right to mess with his life. And to add insult to injury, Job's best friends come to tell him he must have sinned, so time to confess. Even his wife tells him to curse God and die. All the answer Job gets is more questions from God, Who points out he and Job are not exactly peers. What Job does understand in the end is that God loves him. And to Job in the face of his unanswered question finds God's presence and love to be enough.

We too may want to ask God why people suffer - why someone we love gets cancer or heart disease or diabetes or why disasters of nature, violence and famine?

In the face of millions driven from their homes by all the above, we wonder how to help them as well as those close to home. Sometimes there are no answers, only questions and mystery.

Well in the story of Bartimaeus in Mark today we find three mysteries. The first two involve Bartimaeus. How did he know to call Jesus “Son of David”? and how did he know Jesus could heal him? The third mystery is ours. Bartimaeus knew the answer to Jesus’ question, “What do you want me to do for you?”, yet what might our answer be?

Perhaps the place to begin to answer Jesus’ question is to name what we hunger for deep inside us beyond material needs. As many here have experienced success at multiple levels, we know the satisfaction of a goal well met, yet find it fills us only for a while. Then we are hungry again for what we cannot fully name. A friend of mine described it as a God-sized hole in our hearts that only God can fill. So whatever we shove into this space only fills it for the moment as this space was created for God’s presence in our lives alone. Perhaps this is what Job discovered. Though his original question is never answered, God’s presence satisfies Job’s thirst for answers. Perhaps instead of answers, we too are left with loving presence of God so that unanswered questions pale in significance.

Frederick Buechner says, “There are mysteries you can solve by thinking it through, like in a murder mystery whose mysteriousness must be dispelled in order for the truth to be known. There are other mysteries that do not conceal a truth to think your way to, but whose truth is itself the mystery. The mystery of your self, for example. The more you try to fathom it, the more fathomless it is revealed to be. No matter how much of your self you are able to objectify and examine, the quintessential, living part of your self will always elude you, that is, the part that is conducting the examination. Thus you do not solve the mystery, you live the mystery. And you do that not by fully knowing yourself, but by fully being yourself. To say that God is a mystery is to say that you can never nail him down. Even on Christ the nails proved ultimately ineffective.”

Being ourselves includes experiencing God in our relationship with nature, family, friends, church community and other ways that fill the God-sized hole in us. Like when we see a beautiful sunset or a baby’s radiant smile; when we experience the loving touch of friend or spouse; and when someone listens to our trials and tribulations as well as joys until we are done. All these are experiences of God’s presence like Job and Bartimaeus found long ago. Through these experiences, we grow in relationship with God and each other.

Now as church community, we enter a time where our answer to what we are hungry for and what Jesus can do for us will lead us to a new vision, as our mission is already sound. For vision comes from our experiences of God in relationship, and is translated into concrete programs and management. Seeking to engage in faith as a congregation, we will soar with the eagles and not become weary when we discern our new vision of what we will become and what that will look like according to God's new plan for us.

A wonderful image of how all this works was described by George Bullard in this week's Presbytery meeting. He said, "Imagine vision, relationships, programs and management going on a journey together in a car. Vision gets in the front seat as driver. Relationships gets in the front to sit by vision. These two are what we experience here - what some might call the touchy-feel part of community. Programs and management of ministry get in the backseat. They are our infrastructure and operate by what they see here now.

When vision gets in the back seat to sleep and management and programs get in the front seat when we are not clear about vision for a while, this can be OK. For this can be a time during which vision prepares to soar. Programs and Management in the front seat together, however, do not know where we are going. They only know where we have been and what they can see. Only when vision gets back in the driver's seat and relationships sits beside vision in the front will we again live by faith and not by sight." For like Job and Bartimaeus, we are called to live first by faith and not by sight.

As we begin the process in the winter and spring of 2016 to create a new vision together for Westminster as community, we are promised God's presence to guide our way, as an old hymn helps us to remember. "Be still my soul, thy God doth undertake to guide the future as He has the past. Thy hope, thy confidence, let nothing shake; all now mysterious shall be bright at last. Be still my soul: the waves and wind still know His voice who ruled them while He dwelt below" (Be Still My Soul #374, The Hymnal published by the PCUSA).