

“Tommy, Can You See Me?”

Mark 10:46-52 October 25, 2009
Celebration of the Children’s Sabbath

Picture this scene. There is a blind man sitting on the side of the road begging, hoping to collect enough to enable him to buy the food that might help him sleep through the night, to find the strength and the courage to get up the next day and humble himself again. This is not what he expected out of life. At one time he could see, he could work, he could be an active and productive player in society. But now, his eyes only showed him darkness. He could not continue to work, to exist as he once did. Out of desperation he degrades himself daily, hoping for just one denarii, praying that some coin might come his way.

Along that same road came two men who looked right past him. No, they looked right through that blind beggar. They had seen him so often that he no longer made any impression upon them. It was as if he were not there; as invisible to them as they were to him. So the men proudly, perhaps loudly talked about the major excitement that day would bring. Jesus of Nazareth, the alleged prophetic healer, was coming to town. These two men wanted to check him out, to see if this Jesus could live up to all the hype, as if that were even possible. Though the men were only entertained and amused by the prospect of seeing Jesus, the heart of the blind man they could not see leapt in a strange and oft-forbidden hope that if this Jesus could see him, maybe he would be able to see Jesus; just maybe he could see Jesus and all the world around him.

As the noise of the moving crowds filled his ears this blind man, Bartimaeus, realized that this might be his best chance, his only chance to see again. But for him to see, he first had to be seen. And so he cried out, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.” and the people around him reprimanded him, telling him that an important religious figure like Jesus would have no desire to see a sinful, blind beggar like himself. But Bartimaeus had nothing to lose and so he shouted louder, “Jesus, Son of David, can you see me? Can you hear me? Have mercy on me.” And several turned in futile attempts to show him their irritation, like people sometimes do when a baby cries in a restaurant, a theater, or worship service. Undaunted, Bartimaeus cried with all his might, with all his heart, “Jesus, Son of David, will you help me? Will you heal me? Will you make me whole?” And Jesus saw him, and healed him, and made him whole.

A couple of weeks ago I read this story as if I was reading it for the first time. I found it fascinating. It is the tale of a man on the fringe of society, unseen, unrecognized because he cannot understand and take part in the world the way others can. It reminded me of a rock opera that came out about 40 years ago when I was still an infant. A young boy was traumatized so that he was no longer able to interact with the world around him. He was blind, deaf and dumb; unable to experience the world as those around him, though his mother cried out, “Tommy, can you see me?” Many came to him, some to help and heal, others to use and abuse. Like Bartimaeus, he couldn’t see that he couldn’t be seen. Like Bartimaeus, all he felt was a sense of being alone, uniquely alone. In his mind, like Bartimaeus, he kept crying out, “See Me? Feel Me? Touch me? Heal me?”

Now many of you are wondering why I am talking about this when we are celebrating the Children’s Sabbath. It’s a fair question. But you see, I think that there are a lot of little Tommy’s and Bartimaeus’s around today. Not that they are deaf, or dumb, or blind, but that they are not seen, they are not heard, they are not acknowledged by the world around them. They are children. Many flock to them. Some to use them, some to abuse them. Some come to comfort and heal and make whole. But for many, the young hearts cry out in a desperate hope saying, “Can you see me? Can you hear me? Can you touch me? Can you heal me?”

Can you make me whole?" And many wonder if the Church has heard the cries that come from the kids in the communities around them?

Dr. T. Garrott Benjamin, Jr., of the Light of the World Christian Church in Indianapolis has accused many churches of focusing exclusively on adults. The practice has led to boredom, and that boredom has been a contributing factor in the death and decline of the church, and an epidemic of spiritual senility. It is a tough indictment. But the truth is, our children need to be a priority of the church, not merely a program in the church. For if the church is to grow, we cannot put a cap on our future. For too long we have allowed society to control and shape the growth of our children, their ideas and attitudes. We have sat back and lamented that there is this political separation preventing us from doing what we have been called to do. Such attitudes might appeal to our apathy or complacency, but it does not negate the actions and attitudes of Jesus, the same actions and attitudes that we are to imitate through our life and faith. The actions that hear the cries and then go forth to heal and make whole.

The time has come for the church to hear the cries. The time has come for the church to shape the community rather than allowing the community to shape the church. For we see the results when the church is silent. Some have said that it takes a whole village to raise a child. I'm sure that in some parts of the world that is true. I'm not sure it is true here. But the converse is true without a doubt - it takes a whole child to raise a village, to raise a village from despair and hopelessness, to raise a village from pain and confusion, to raise a village requires our children to be healed and made whole. But the children of today get into guns before they have a chance to get into God. They get into pistols before they get into prayer. They get into hip-hop before they can get into holiness and healing. They are introduced to crack before they are told about Christ. They know about drugs long before they have a saving knowledge of the Divine Lord. They are flooded with views and images of violence long before they have any sense of a vision of unimaginable grace.

It is time for the church, for this Church to step up to the challenge. It is time to develop a passion for the plight and potential of the young people within this place, and within the communities of Central Pennsylvania. And the way we do that, is to hear their cries; to listen to their complaints; to look upon their pain and confusion; to lament in their uncertainty and loneliness. When we see, when we understand, then we can reach out with empathy and compassion, then we can reach out to wash them in our tears of mercy. For when we truly understand how much is at stake in each young life, when we look at the struggle to move beyond the darkness of this world, the great longing to see the light of truth and life, it is enough to make you cry. And whatever makes you cry, as you look upon the life of another, is something that you have been assigned to heal.

Understand that we are not looking for volunteers to stand up and step out. We are looking for servants. For the church is not a volunteer organization, but an organization called to serve. After all, Jesus was never called a suffering volunteer, but the suffering servant. I turn here to the writings of Stephen Portner, a pastor serving in this conference. He notes that the word "volunteer" is only found twice in the Bible, and in some versions, not at all. But "servant" is mentioned over 400 or 500 times. And there is more to think about than that. I quote,

"The dictionary describes a volunteer as a person who offers himself or herself for a service without obligation to do so." It defines a servant as "a person in the service of another." Do you see the difference?

A volunteer has a choice because he or she is not obligated to do anything. They give of their time and of their own volition. A servant does not have a choice because he or she is employed (or in some cases, owned) by the person they are serving. ... As servants of the church we are employed by God to do what God desires us to do. God doesn't punish us for not being in his service, but we do miss out on the joy of serving Him and showing Him how much we love Him, honor Him and glorify Him for what He has done for us.

"Where a volunteer thinks that church is no different than any other volunteer organization, a servant knows that the church is uniquely organized for a divine purpose. A volunteer asks, "What do I get out of it?" but a servant asks, "What does God want me to do?" A volunteer works under their own power, strength, wisdom, and experience; but a servant is equipped by God to do things that are otherwise impossible. A volunteer expects personal affirmation; but a servant focuses on glorifying God and uplifting the body of Christ. A volunteer limits the time volunteered but a servant never ceases to be a servant. A volunteer believes, "The parish is my world" but a servant knows, "The world is my parish." A volunteer believes involvement is a choice but a servant believes it is an obligation and a privilege to serve God. A volunteer says, "Does anyone notice what I have done?" but a servant says, "Look at what God is doing!" A volunteer chooses but a servant is chosen. A volunteer sets out to get a job done but a servant sets out to be obedient."

I say again, we are not looking for volunteers to stand up and step out. We are looking for servants, people who will give of their time, their talents, their energy not because they want to, but because they are called by the power and grace of God to make a difference in the church, and to make a difference in the world. We are to be like Jeremiah. God's word, God's call burned within his heart and soul until he began to act upon it. And so must God's call burn within us.

Understand that just a few minutes ago we promised before God to surround a child and his family with a community of love. That means that these are our children, part of our family. We promised to faithfully participate in the ministries of the church by our prayers, our presence, our gifts, and our service. That means we will be involved in their lives. We promised to live according to the example of Christ, and Christ saw the people, the children, and he reached out to touch, and heal, and make them whole. Don't wait to be asked to serve because the truth is we have been asked time and time again. We have been asked every time there was an opening noted in the newsletter or bulletin. And we were asked when Jesus said, *ALet the children come to me and do not hinder them. For to such belongs the kingdom of God."*

But I am afraid that too many churches have become like the pharisees around Bartimaeus who would no longer notice that a person, a human being was living, was struggling and dying, spiritually if not physically, right at their feet. Have we become separated and removed so far from our children and youth that, like Tommy, they do not hear an answer when they cry out, *ACan you see me? Can you hear me? Can you touch me? Can you heal me?"*

It is ironic that many parents I have met work very hard to give their children the things, the experiences that they never had as a child. As a result, the children in this society have more things than ever before. They have stereos, CD's and TV's. They have computers, cell phones and DVD's. Just a year or so ago Sony came out with their new play station and thousands upon thousands stood in line, some waiting all night so they and their children could play games. Kids don't know how to play *Akick the can"* anymore because they can't find the power switch. We pay and run and over-schedule to give our children the opportunities to play

soccer and football, karate and dancing, cheerleading and skateboarding. But in our zeal to give them what we did not have, do we neglect to give them what most did have, and what they need most, a loving, stable, safe relationship, where threats and fear cannot enter in. Do we listen to their cries to be heard and accepted? Do we see them in their struggles, look upon them with the wisdom of knowing when to comfort and when to discipline, when to heal and when to simply sit with them as we hear the cries of our children and youth?

The cries of Tommy could not be heard. But when that blind beggar on the side of the road cried out, “Jesus, Son of David, can you see me? Can you hear me? Can you heal me?” the cries did not fall on deaf ears. And Jesus, with compassion and grace reached out to enable Bartimaeus, formerly known as the blind beggar, to interact with the world with health and strength again. He gave him the sight and insight to build relationships, to grow in life and faith. Today many children are crying out in the same way. We, the church, need to hear their cries. In imitation of Jesus we need to step forward to enter into relationships with these little ones among us. We must help them to see hope in their future, to hear God’s call in their life, to step out into society boldly, without fear, that our whole children might be able to raise the village around them to new heights, to new glories; that they might be able to grow in life and faith in the power and the peace of the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We are called to care for the least among us in the name of Jesus. We are called to enter into healing; growing in faith relationships with all the children we meet. People of St. Paul, will you make that commitment to care for the children and youth in this church and in all the community around us? Will you love them and heal them, pray for them and accept them into your family? Will you enter into relationships with them so that they can be healed, so they can grow in wisdom and faith, so they may be made whole in the power and grace in the Lord Jesus Christ? Then let us go forth to be the people, the servants God has called us to be. Let us be the body of Christ in the world now and forever. In your life may it be so. Amen and amen.