

PUSHING PAST NATURAL TENDENCIES

10/28/18 ~ St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Encinitas, CA

Proper 25 (B): Jeremiah 31:7-9; Psalm 126; Hebrews 7:23-28; Mark 10:46-52

Another tragedy struck our country yesterday; this time in the joint service of three Jewish congregations at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, where people—just like you and me—were gunned down during their time of worship. In the next moments of silence, I invite you to hold in prayer the victims, their friends and families who mourn them, those who will be doing their best to lead these faith communities forward, the first responders, and the gunman...

[Silence]

...In the midst of their loss, pain, and sorrow, we pray they might experience God's presence, God's peace...God's love. AMEN.

I ask you, then, to consider this message in light of that tragedy...

So what would you consider to be some of your natural tendencies? You know...those things you'd rather not do, but you've realized, or you're beginning to realize, that maybe it's time to push past your hesitation—past your natural tendency. One of my natural tendencies is that my stomach turns upside down at the sight of a wound or even the thought of the pain caused by injury.

You might think I look all cool and calm, and that I have a natural bedside manner, but if any of you have ever tried to show me how well your stomach is healing from surgery...without giving me warning...or tell me about having to have a needle inserted into your eye, you may have noticed me wincing...if ever so slightly.

I mean, it's so bad that a few months ago, when I texted my cousin to see how she was recovering from some surgery she had on her hand, and her text back was a photo of her cuts, bruises, incisions, I immediately texted back : "I did NOT need to see that!!" And, of course, I included the little green, gaggy-faced emoji.

But as a priest, most of you expect that I will come to visit you in the hospital and not pass out while I'm praying with you. Thankfully for all of us, my CPE experience helped me push past my natural tendency. CPE stands for: Clinical Pastoral Education, and is essentially a 3-month internship as a hospital chaplain.

I fretted for months before it began about how I was going to get through this required part of the ordination process. I knew I needed to do it, and I wanted to be able to be the person who had a good bedside manner, but I just couldn't imagine how I was going to do it!

To this day, I remember clearly the first hospital room I entered. And, by the way, as a hospital chaplain, you're basically making cold calls...just going from door-to-door asking if each patient would like a visit, or have some prayers. So that was anxiety-producing enough on its own; plus there was the fact that this was a Level IV trauma center, so it was highly likely—almost a given—that the person I was going to see would be suffering from a visible, life-threatening injury.

Before I entered that first room, anticipating the horror I would see on the other side of the door, I stopped to pray (I highly recommend prayer when you're pushing through natural tendencies). I got very still and very real with God: "Okay, God. This is on you. If you want me to be a priest, then you have to help me get through this. You have to make it so I can be fully present to this person in need."

And that's exactly what happened. The Holy Spirit took over and I felt a sense of peace and calm as I greeted the woman. I can't claim that I was actually fully present to her, because while I stared at the tube coming out of her neck, the tape holding it in place, and the fresh wound around that tube, I was thinking: "How am I looking at this right now, and not fainting?"

It seems to me that that's what happened to Bartimaeus. Our reading from Mark this morning, has Bartimaeus calling out to Jesus along the roadside, pushing past his natural tendencies. Remember, he is described as a blind beggar, so he belonged to what some cultures call the "untouchables." He was not supposed to interact with the healthy, "normal" people of the city, and he was certainly not supposed to ask a favor of someone like Jesus. So, in fact, the people who had been following Jesus, tell him to be quiet.

Many of you have been in that place; that place where people tell you you should be quiet; you shouldn't make waves; you shouldn't really exist. And when you're in those places, you begin to believe it's true, and you stop speaking out; you stop making waves; you stop really existing. And you become convinced—like Bartimaeus must have—that this way of being in the world is your natural tendency.

But something happened to Bartimaeus that day. Something wakes up inside of him, and he claims the Good News of Christ for himself. He pushes past his natural tendency and refuses to be quiet. He yells even louder, over and over, so that finally, Jesus himself stops and says, "My goodness, that guy's persistent. Bring him to me." At that moment, Jesus opens the door to the Kingdom to this blind beggar, asking him directly: "What do you want me to do for you?"

Now, if you remember, this is the same question we heard Jesus ask James and John in last week's Gospel: "What is it you want me to do for you?". I think this is significant—that Jesus treats this blind "untouchable" with the same respect and loving attention as he does his chosen disciples. "What do you want me to do for you?"

As Richard mentioned in his sermon, answering that question is weighted with responsibility. But Bartimaeus has heard of the power of Jesus, so responds boldly: "Let me see again," and without any further ado, he is healed, and Jesus sends him on his way: "Go; your faith has made you well."

But here's where this healing story differs from so many others. Bartimaeus doesn't go "on his way." Rather we are told that after being healed—after having his sight restored—Bartimaeus follows Jesus. The passage reads: "immediately he regained his sight and followed ~~him~~ [Jesus] on the way." So not only does Bartimaeus now see, he believes. Who knows. Maybe that was his intention the whole time.

Maybe Bartimaeus already understood the Good News, and knew he was called to share it, but that he would be more effective if he could see, so he seeks healing. In fact, we are given clues that Bartimaeus does have a subconscious knowing—an intuitive inkling, perhaps—that something extraordinary was about to happen. We know this because he calls Jesus by a title not many people had been using.

“Son of David,” Bartimaeus calls, “Son of David, have mercy on me.” In using this title, he is sending Jesus the message that he knows Jesus has something special to offer. Jesus is not just another guy doing healings in the area, rather, on some level, Bartimaeus knows there is more to this man than meets the eye.

Bartimaeus is proclaiming his belief that this is the Son of David, the anointed one who has the power to grant the promise of abundant life. Whether he fully understood or not, in his encounter with Jesus, Bartimaeus is transformed—his life will never be the same again.

That’s what happened when I said my prayer outside that first hospital room. Like many transformations, the end product wasn’t just the thing I was hoping for—in this case, that I didn’t faint and crack my head open on the cold hospital floor—the end product was that I discovered one of my God-given gifts. Once I pushed through my natural tendency of avoiding things I didn’t like looking at, I found that I’m really good at being with people in their most vulnerable times.

In that encounter—because I was willing to push through my natural tendency—maybe because I was also in a very vulnerable position—my life was transformed. I get to be in the most holy of moments with people—when they are hurting; when they are struggling to hang on to life, or to let go, I get to be there assuring them that they are not alone...sharing with them the Good News of Christ—just like Bartimaeus.

Of course, we all know that life doesn’t always work that way—it’s not always possible to just decide to do something, say a little prayer, and have it work out exactly the way we plan—but when we listen closely to that still, small voice of God deep inside us; when we discern with our hearts and not our own wills, we might just make a difference—or at the very least, experience some transformation in our own lives. And I promise you, that ripples out in life-giving ways!

Even though no one of us can ensure that yesterday’s tragedy in Pittsburgh will never happen again, we can each take life-giving measures in our own lives—with our own families; within our own community—so that we change the tone around us. We can ask, like Bartimaeus, “Where in my life is God calling me to follow Christ by pushing through a natural tendency?”

Maybe it’s volunteering to cook at the weekly meal program; maybe it’s calling on a neighbor who’s shut-in; maybe it’s participating in a local rally; maybe it’s making a connection with someone or something you’d rather not look at. That’s between you and God.

But what I know, is that as we push past our natural tendencies, as we allow our vulnerabilities to be our foundation, as Bartimaeus did, we are able to be present to the people and situations in front of us, and that can become a deeply meaningful, wonderfully joyous, and absolutely holy encounter. Go. Pray. Follow Jesus, and push past your natural tendencies.

-AMEN

Collect of the Day:

Almighty and everlasting God, increase in us the gifts of faith, hope, and charity; and, that we may obtain what you promise, make us love what you command; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Jeremiah 31:7-9

Thus says the LORD:

Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob,
and raise shouts for the chief of the nations;
proclaim, give praise, and say,
"Save, O LORD, your people,
the remnant of Israel."

See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north,
and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth,
among them the blind and the lame, those with child and
those in labor, together;
a great company, they shall return here.

With weeping they shall come,
and with consolations I will lead them back,
I will let them walk by brooks of water,
in a straight path in which they shall not stumble;
for I have become a father to Israel,
and Ephraim is my firstborn.

Psalm 126

- 1
When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, *
then were we like those who dream.
- 2
Then was our mouth filled with laughter, *
and our tongue with shouts of joy.
- 3
Then they said among the nations, *
"The LORD has done great things for them."
- 4
The LORD has done great things for us, *
and we are glad indeed.
- 5
Restore our fortunes, O LORD, *
like the watercourses of the Negev.
- 6
Those who sowed with tears *
will reap with songs of joy.
- 7
Those who go out weeping, carrying the seed, *
will come again with joy, shouldering their sheaves.

Hebrews 7:23-28

The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office; but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. Consequently he is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.

For it was fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, blameless, undefiled, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. Unlike the other high priests, he has no need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for those of the people; this he did once for all when he offered himself. For the law appoints as high priests those who are subject to weakness, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever.

Mark 10:46-52

Jesus and his disciples 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.