

October 28, 2018
23rd Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 25, Year B, RCL
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St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Job 42:1-6, 10-17
Psalm 34:1-8, 19-22
Hebrews 7:23-28
Mark 10:46-52

May I speak with God, Creator, Word, and Holy Spirit.

There's a cartoon that often goes around. A speaker asks the audience, "Who wants change?" and every hand goes up. Then the speaker asks, "Who wants TO change"? Every hand goes down.

Today's lessons focus on healing, and healing requires change. Just like Job and Bartimaeus, the world itself needs healing—but to get it, we're going to have to change. As individuals, as the church, and as a society, we need to do far more to live the Jesus-centered way of life that our Presiding Bishop calls "the Way of Love."

Prior to today's reading, Job lost both his family and his wealth, which confuses him. His theology says that bad things only happen to bad people. He knows that he has not sinned, so he angrily demands answers.

God speaks, but doesn't give Job any answers. Instead, God rebukes Job, telling him that while Job acts on a human scale, God works on a cosmic scale. Just as a dog can never understand how mirrors work, neither can human theologies ever be sufficient to truly understand our infinite God.

Instead of asking for answers, we need to ask for a relationship. Today we heard Job accept this new premise, repent, and change his theology. In so doing, he finds a deeper relationship with God, and at least some measure of healing.

The psalmist also seeks God and finds healing in that relationship: "This poor soul cried, and was heard by the Lord, and was saved from every trouble."

Then in Mark, the story seems straight forward enough: Bartimaeus yearns to see, and Jesus heals him. But there are some details worth noting. First, the crowd tries to silence Bartimaeus, but Jesus listens to him anyway. Second, Bartimaeus calls Jesus the Son of David—the first time Mark uses this phrase. It is the blind man who has spiritual sight, recognizing that Jesus is the Messiah. Third, though our translation today says that the crowd told Bartimaeus, "Take heart," another common translation says, "Take courage." Even positive change like what Bartimaeus will experience is hard, and requires courage.

It can be tough to hear these stories of healing while also hearing story after story in the news of shootings, hurricanes, and bigotry. Where's the healing WE were promised, healing for society today?

Just this week, the *New York Times* reported that the Trump administration might soon define gender solely by birth, denying the very existence of transgender Americans. God's trans children do not deserve this evil maliciousness—and the church must respond. As my bishop in the Diocese of Spokane wrote, "To erase identity is to erase what is fundamental to our being and is dehumanizing... [This violates our] baptismal vows, vows [we] took to respect the dignity

of every human.” I am happy to add that the church has indeed begun to respond; just before the service, I learned that at this weekend’s convention, the Episcopal Diocese of Connecticut passed a resolution affirming the identity and value of transgender and non-binary persons. More is needed, but that is a good first step.

Other recent news that cries for healing is the major new report from the International Panel on Climate Change, which declared that global warming is even more dire than feared. If we don’t change our way of life and cut greenhouse gas emissions in half in just 12 years, then almost immediately, the food shortages, wildfires, hurricanes, and mass coral-reef die-offs we are already experiencing will grow far worse, far faster than expected, tearing apart the fragile earth systems God designed. All will be affected, but especially the poor.

Then yesterday morning, we woke to the unspeakable news of yet more gun violence, the hateful, anti-Semitic murder of our Jewish sisters and brothers at Pittsburgh’s Tree of Life synagogue. We would be remiss if we did not point out that the Christian church has a troubled history of anti-Semitism in our past, so we have a special responsibility to be there now for our Jewish friends, with more than just words.

The shooter, who is white, is now in custody, which raises another problem: How often are violent white suspects arrested, but how often do suspected criminals of color meet more deadly fates?

I could go on. Perhaps I already have. Like Job expressing his sorrows, and like Bartimaeus begging for sight, we need to be able to bring wounds like these to God. Church is one place to do that. So as we worship, we also ask, where is the healing that this world needs?

God is always with us in the dark times. Easter *always* follows Good Friday. Healing *is* on the way. But, we cannot sit around just waiting for it to happen. Just as Job changed his theology to find a new relationship with God, and just as the disciples gave up everything to follow Jesus, we too need to change.

Healing begins when we walk the Way of Love. What does that look like? Who are we called to be? What change is required of us?

I have four suggestions. They aren’t enough. But they will get us started.

The first suggestion is the easiest one: Those of us who are eligible to vote in next week’s election must do so. And we can’t just approach the ballot box as Americans—we must do so as Christians, and vote our values.

Now, I firmly believe in the separation of church and state. The church should not endorse candidates. But “church and state” is not the same thing as faith and politics. Remember, in recognizing Jesus as the Messiah, Bartimaeus called him “son of David.” David was a king, so this title was an affront to the Roman empire. Christ’s reign is predominantly spiritual, but there is also a clear political element, one that calls us to change social systems here and now.

So as Episcopalians, let us always remember our baptismal vows, including when we vote: Vows to resist evil, to love our neighbors, and to strive for justice and peace. I can't say which candidates will do the most for the poor, the weak, the sick, the lonely, or the earth, but I can say that that is the basis on which we should evaluate them.

Of course, since we only get to vote a few times a year, voting is not enough to define a Christian life. The second change required to walk the Way of Love and find social healing is a far bigger one, and that is to try and remember Christ every minute of every day, living our values and letting love flow from us in all that we do.

This means voting in November, but it also means calling elected officials all year 'round. It means walking lightly on the earth: using less electricity and plastic, driving less, and eating less meat. (That one's hard for me.) It means showing up at rallies and protests if able, rallies like those for Nelson Pinos, living in sanctuary from ICE at First and Summerfield Methodist Church for nearly a year. It means volunteering at events like Loaves and Fishes in Wooster Square, if able. It can mean increasing one's pledge to St. Thomas's here in stewardship season.

These are all important and perhaps well-known Christian actions. Yet living the Way of Love is harder than it seems, because it's not just about what we do or even who we are. It's about *how* we are.

Are we dwelling in a state of love? Are we grounding all things in God? *How* do we treat one another in daily life? Saying please and thank you might be little things, but the little things can go a long way. Here in the northeast, we don't often smile at strangers on the street, but it would make a difference.

While saying hello on the sidewalk is one thing, what about our personal spaces? How often do we let out exasperated sighs when coworkers, classmates, or even family members say something obnoxious? How often do we snipe at people behind their backs, refuse to let someone merge on the freeway, swear at the person who refuses to let us merge, or question others' motives with no real reason? I'm as guilty of these things as anyone. As the letter to the Hebrews says, only Christ is perfect; we clergy are subject to weakness. Yet these little things do matter. They shape the big things. So in our weakness, let us all ask: Are we at least trying to dwell in a state of love?

This leads to the third change we must seek in order to live the Way of Love, and to make space for Christ to heal this world: We need to listen more.

My heart breaks over all of the anger in this country. We really do need more civility. Don't get me wrong; I'm not talking about people who challenge the authorities in public. I see no problem with peacefully but loudly confronting officials who separate babies from their families.

But there is a difference in how we talk to abusive officials and how we talk to their supporters, neighbors we are called to love. When Jesus met the pharisees, he wasn't afraid to call them hypocrites, but when the crowd tried to silence Bartimaeus, Jesus did not rebuke them. He simply called the blind man forth, and let the crowd see His love.

Yet my Facebook feed is filled with insults aimed not just at politicians, but also at their supporters. All too often I see friends, including Episcopalians, say, "Trump is morally bankrupt and if you still support him, so are you." Yes, when we see a crowd yelling at a Bartimaeus, or when we see people shout "All lives matter" in the face of "Black lives matter," we can choose to scream right back. I get it: When only one side seems to be sending pipe bombs, insults feel benign. And while there really is no comparison between the two, it's also not about keeping score. There is another, more effective way to challenge injustice: Living the Way of Love.

Let us be like Jesus, rebuking the authorities AND loving our neighbors.

Fourth, and finally, we can all pray more.

When Bartimaeus called out to Christ, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me," that was a prayer. And Jesus answered.

Every one of Job's laments, every one of his demands for answers, was a prayer. For all his anguish and anger, he was still seeking God. And eventually, as we heard today, he found God.

In prayer, we too can find and grow closer to God. Prayer can also help heal our relationships with those for whom we pray. Perhaps this is why Job prayed for the three friends whose lectures had added to his grief. Perhaps this is why Jesus tells us to pray for our enemies, and why Paul tells us to pray for our leaders, including Donald Trump.

As the Rev. Barbara Cawthorne Crafton writes, "Think about praying first for the one who infuriates you... Don't pray anything specific for them... Just name them before God... Something interesting will happen if [we] begin to do this: [Our] foe will become a human being... This is the beginning of healing."

Such healing is not always easy. Job found healing, but he will always miss his first children.

Change is also hard. There is a reason the crowd told Bartimaeus to take courage, and there is a reason Jesus said, take up your cross—your electric chair—and follow me.

Selflessness and sacrifice are not the Western way of life. Yet Christ's love is more than worth it. And how awesome and beautiful must such healing and grace be that such a price is truly worth it?

So, vote. Root daily life in Christ. Listen more. And pray more.

Together, as St. Thomas's and as the Body of Christ, let us find healing for this world, for God's world. Together, let us live the Way of Love. Amen.