

Messiah Moravian Church
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Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost
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HAVE MERCY

The writer Kurt Vonnegut, author of such novels as *Cat's Cradle*, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, preached only one sermon in his life. It was at the invitation of an Episcopal Church for their Palm Sunday service in 1980. He began his sermon this way: "Being merciful, it seems to me, is the only good idea we have received so far [from Christianity]. Perhaps we will get another idea that good by and by, and then we will have two good ideas. What might that second good idea be? I don't know. How could I know? I will make a wild guess that it will come from music somehow. I have often wondered what music is and why we love it so. It may be that music is that second good idea's being born."

Throughout the sermon he praises Jesus as someone who had a good sense of humor and someone who showed mercy. Vonnegut refers to himself as a "Christ-worshipping agnostic."

He concludes by saying, "This has no doubt been a silly sermon. I am sure you do not mind. People don't come to church for preachments, of course, but to daydream about God. I thank you for your sweetly faked attention."

I like his idea of coming to church "to daydream about God." So if you haven't done that yet today, please feel free to do so during the remaining few minutes. I won't mind. Meanwhile, I'll talk about his other point: Mercy, "the only good idea we have received so far."

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall be shown mercy." Being merciful is good discipleship practice but in today's story Bartimaeus, the new disciple is the one receiving mercy. He is willing to call, shout, and stumble forward for mercy.

Bartimaeus is the final recorded encounter that Jesus has before he parades into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey that we commemorate on Palm Sunday. In Mark's gospel, this is a very intentional textual device because chapters 8--10 describe Jesus's movement from north to south, from the northern borders of Galilee to the beginning of the steep ascent from Jericho to Jerusalem.

As Jesus makes his way to Jerusalem, we are confronted again and again with the question of what it means to be a disciple. Along the way we have met some surprising candidates for discipleship. Children are praised as being model disciples. Someone who is doing powerful deeds of healing but who is not in the official discipleship circle is proclaimed to be a de facto disciple. “Don’t stop him.” Jesus said, “Whoever is not against us is for us.” Meanwhile the official disciples stumble and bumble their way along, failing to understand. Just before meeting up with Bartimaeus, they argue over administrative positions of power in what they believe will be Jesus’s imminent new kingdom.

Earlier, a potential disciple had approached Jesus with a troubling question: “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Eventually Jesus gives him an answer that was sure to drive away almost any aspiring follower: “... sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have real treasure; then come, follow me.” Now, who could actually comply with that? Yes, being a disciple is hard, almost impossible.

After showing examples of how not to be a disciple, Mark then gives us the story about an instant disciple--Bartimaeus. It has everything to do with mercy, the very thing the blind beggar cries out for: “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.”

The crowd rebukes him and urges him to be quiet. Shouting in public that someone was the Son of David, another title of the long-anticipated Jewish Messiah, proclaimed allegiance to a ruler other than the Roman emperor. It would attract the attention of Roman authorities, and that could only end badly. The crowd wants nothing to do with Rome or a potentially treasonous outburst.

The road from Jericho to Jerusalem that Jesus travels was one that many Jews would have walked as they made pilgrimage to the Holy City during one of the three major festival days. Passover approaches and foot traffic increases. Bartimaeus positions himself along the busy thoroughfare and shouts for alms. If shouting does not work, he has another strategy— shouting even louder.

He shouts for Jesus, “Son of David.” Although other gospels use this title freely for Jesus, this is the first time it appears in Mark. It is a title that Jesus will reject a little later while in Jerusalem because of its dangerous Messianic kingship overtones. Peter had earlier called Jesus the right name, Christ, and Jesus rebuked him. Now a blind beggar shouts out the wrong name, and Jesus welcomes him. Jesus is not even asking Bartimaeus to be a disciple. After giving him sight, Jesus doesn’t say, “Come, follow me.” He says, “Go, your faith has made you well.”

Jesus told the rich young ruler to “Come, follow me,” but he went away grieving. Now Jesus tells someone to go away in good faith. Instead, Bartimaeus follows Jesus “on the

way,” a symbolic reference to Jesus’s Way, the way of discipleship. Unlike the rich young ruler, Bartimaeus leaves all that he possesses—his cloak—and joins the band of followers on his own initiative, unable to stop himself.

Some years ago, Terry Gross of National Public Radio’s program *Fresh Air* interviewed Marine Lu Lobello, who was in Iraq in the early days of that war. He was part of a Marine unit that fired on three cars of Iraqis, mistaking them for combatants and killing three members of the Kachodorian family. He began suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and tried to make sense of his involvement in the war. He tracked down the family’s whereabouts in Iraq with the intention of sending them a video apology but he eventually ended up personally visiting the family along with a journalist. The family welcomed them into their home, fed them, and repeatedly expressed their forgiveness, their mercy. In that interview, a battle-weary Marine receives mercy and educates the radio audience about its remarkable impact on his life and mental health.

An offering of mercy does not guarantee gratitude or rewarding outcomes. It can be a pretty risky undertaking. Bartimaeus might just as well have left the scene, sight restored, without a trace of gratitude. Lu Lobello might just as well have flown back home with a story about how weak and unpatriotic the victimized Iraqis are for not wanting to fight back.

As Christians in the West, we are probably more accustomed giving mercy, wondering sometimes if it is producing much of an outcome. Yet being on the opposite end of mercy as a receiver is equally important. When we have received mercy, when we have been given that gift of grace, that opening of space and opportunity that was not there before, we can appreciate how extraordinary a gift it is. We can treasure the occasion to use the gift well. Consider when you been on the receiving end of mercy. Did you it shape you in some way? Or might it shape you now as you reflect on it? I wonder how my own life would have been different over the years if I had not received mercy from family, friends, even strangers.

Blessed are those of us who have received mercy, who shout for it, whisper for it, who accept it for the remarkable gift that it is. May it give us insight that we did not have before.

Perhaps Vonnegut was right: Mercy is “the only good idea we have received so far.” And there is a decent chance the second good idea might come from music, so let’s sing.