

Pentecost 22, Proper 25
Church of the Good Shepherd, Silver City, NM

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The Faithful Remnant

The story of blind Bartimaeus has captured the imagination of us all for as long as the story has been told. It gathers together so many themes that we hold so dear: Help for the helpless; Humility in the face of pride; Vindication of the needy; and unexpected kindness. There is, perhaps, something that is not quite so obvious, but in terms of our faith, is just as important. Let me try to unpack it for you.

It is reflected in the other lessons for today. Let's go back to the reading from Jeremiah. Jeremiah is known as the weeping prophet. He is always bemoaning something or other, usually the unfaithfulness of Israel and the coming calamity because of it. He's not easy to read. The oracle he delivers in today's reading is a bit uncharacteristic. God will bring back a remnant. When you read more thoroughly, this is the theme of the whole book. Things will get bad, but then they'll get better. The term used is "remnant," and it is a theme that you find interwoven in all the prophecies of Israel during the time of the Exile. It is a shining ray of hope in the midst of dark times. Though God has allowed Babylon to carry the Chosen People off into captivity because of Israel's unfaithfulness, God will restore a remnant who will be faithful.

The psalm is what is called an "exilic psalm." It praises God for restoring a faithful remnant. It exults in the saving acts of God. As you read through you get double-vision. It addresses the action in the past tense at the beginning, and then mid-stream it asks for the restoration. The first part anticipates what the psalmist prays earnestly for and so speaks of it in the past tense to express his complete confidence in the answer.

The Epistle lesson from Hebrews talks about Jesus, our Great High Priest, who, after the order of Melchizedek, endures forever. The priesthood of Aaron was composed of sinful men who had to offer sacrifice for themselves as well as the people, and because they were mortal they had to pass it down from one to another through the generations. Those who follow this High Priest are called out from the priesthood of Aaron to one more faithful.

When Bartimaeus calls out, "Have mercy on me, Son of David," he is appealing to Jesus as the promised Messiah, the one who would come to restore Israel, the great Gatherer of the Faithful Remnant—and by golly, he was going to be one of them!

Others tried to hush him up. They didn't want to make time and space for this imperfect

man. Assuming that they were "on the inside," they didn't want to have to bother with a troublesome one, one who would require extra care and help because he was blind, one who was in the way. Maybe they thought that being Israelites they were automatically part of the spiritual insiders. But Jesus came to call sinners, not righteous people. He came to call us to repentance, a turning away from our previous life, and a turning toward God. He calls us to the discipline of being part of the Faithful Remnant.

Surprise, surprise, this "imperfect one" is welcomed, and not only welcomed, but restored to sight. Perhaps in the end, Bartimaeus saw what others did not see. He saw that Jesus is not merely a wise teacher or an interesting man. Jesus is the Gatherer of the Faithful Remnant. Maybe his healing is merely Jesus putting his body in sync with his soul.

What does the idea of the Faithful Remnant mean for us today? First, there are some things it does not mean. It does not mean that we are automatically in and others are automatically out. The people who tried to hush up Bartimaeus assumed they were in and they didn't see what he did. Being part of the Faithful Remnant is not a source of pride. As reflected in the Psalm, it is always a source of wonderment and gratitude. We are thankful that we have been gathered into what God is doing.

It's not a Boy Scout badge or rank that we get and get to keep. It's not a mark on our souls that means that we're "in," and don't have to worry about it anymore. This is a journey that we are on with Jesus and all the rest of those being gathered. It's end is the Heart of God, which is infinite and will take an infinity to reach. It's like hiking--always taking the next step.

What is it, then? It is the essence of the Apophatic Way, the way of loss, of giving up, of risking what you have for the sake of what you do not have. There is something that is always a bit unsatisfied in it, for being part of the Faithful Remnant means always hungering for more, always willing to leave behind the good in exchange for the best, of pressing inward, upward and heavenward.

Where is your hunger for God? It is expressed in everything you do that is not what you would do if you were not a person of faith. It is everything different about you because you believe.

I can tell you where I see it in the community of Good Shepherd. I see it when people show up and engage in Sunday School, Tuesday Afternoon Book Study, Small Group discussions, EfM, and when people make comments about the sermons—especially when they take issue with something (for it means they are really listening and wanting to learn.) But that's not all. I see it when there is an appeal for a need and the need is met

over-abundantly. I see it when people volunteer for the After School Program and Garage Sale, the Bazaar and Honduras, United Campus Ministry and Eucharistic Visitors. I see it when people volunteer to bring shut-ins to church and to church functions, when people stand for Vestry and serve on committees, and go to Convention to participate in the life of the Church. What's more, I see it when people show up for worship, give of your substance out of gratitude for what you have received, share in the Cursillo Community, and when we pray for one another.

And of course, that begs the question, where are you still unsatisfied? That holy hunger is pointing you to the heart of God. Those who so hunger are being gathered into God's Faithful Remnant. Like old blind Bartimaeus, do not hesitate to call out, "Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me!"