

Looking for a Miracle
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Sept. 30, 2018 Pilgrim Church UCC Rev. Karen E. Gale

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Mark 10:46-52

Loud people make me uncomfortable.

I don't know about you, but when someone comes at me at full volume, or when I pass someone who is shouting, or loudly demanding, I find myself withdrawing, stepping back, cutting myself or them off.

Loud people make me uncomfortable. I was raised in the solid New England tradition of stoic, silent suffering and carefully modulated voices. There was no room for drawing attention to oneself, never mind shouting. Heaven forbid!

People in Jesus' day weren't much for shouting either, certainly not if you were some low life beggar sitting outside the gate because you were blind, a clear indication that you sinned or your parents sinned or just God did not like you. Shut up! Don't bother the local hero as he passes through town. Be quiet.

But then there is Bartimaeus. He calls for Jesus' attention. He shouts for Jesus to hear him. "Son of David have mercy on me." Mercy! What's all that racket?

Bartimaeus was a loud person, a pushy person, well, as pushy as one can be sitting on the ground on the dirt edge of the road.

Who knows why Bartimaeus was blind--childhood illness, accident with a slingshot, congenital disease, the persistent flies that carried a wildly infectious and common first century eye disease that damaged the eye ducts and eventually rendered a person blind.

And yet, though Bartimaeus might have been blind, he certainly could see.

The crowds are cheering on the local miracle man. He turns water to wine. He is the life of the party. Bartimaeus cries out, "Jesus, rabbouni, son of David, have mercy on me." But the disciples have yet to understand what Jesus has been talking about, their latest accomplishment has been arguing over who is the greatest.

Bartimaeus calls to Jesus saying, "I see you, I know you, I ask you to have mercy."

Jesus stops and asks Bartimaeus, "what do you want me to do for you?"

Does he want to be the greatest like the disciples? Does he want to overthrow the government?

What does Bartimaeus want? "Let me see again."

And Jesus said to him, "Go, your faith has made you well."

It is a miracle? Yes?....

What exactly is the miracle?

It is interesting the Greek word used here. It is *soza* which is a bit tricky to translate. Greek words often have within them layers of meaning. In this case Jesus is saying, Your faith has cured you, your faith has made you whole, your faith has saved you—physical cure was only part of a larger restoration complete and Bartimaeus immediately joins them on the road, casting off the cloak of his trade.

What is the miracle here?

That the man can see?

That he is brave enough to yell out for mercy?

That he is restored to the community—no longer relegated to the edges, the margins?

That he jumps up and follows Jesus—the miracle being his immediate acceptance of the call, to go, to hit the road with Jesus, to follow, to live out his call?

(Oh great, one imagines the disciples saying. Now we have a loud mouth to deal with.)

It is interesting to take this text as one reflects on greater understanding and advocacy with the disability/accessibility/differently-abled community

So often this text is used as text of terror. If you have enough faith, you will be healed just like Bartimaeus. Your blindness, your epilepsy, your bipolar, your MS will be cured.

But that is not what the text really is about. Bartimaeus doesn't need to be "fixed" nor do most folks want to be "fixed." Bartimaeus wants to be heard. He wants Jesus mercy. He wants to be able to see again, which in this case did not have much to do with enjoying the scenery, but everything to do with being enabled to do ministry at Jesus' side.

Bartimaeus isn't someone who can't see in most important sense. He hears Jesus, knows about Jesus, and is very clear about who Jesus is—the son of David. Someone who can bring him mercy, and healing. Bartimaeus sees quite clearly, more clearly than most anyone else.

But in first century Palestine, if you are blind, you are excluded, pushed aside, avoided, not seen, not heard.

So, to be heard meant Bartimaeus had to be pretty loud. He had to shout. This is not unfamiliar when folks challenge society to change. Often you have to shout. For the healing that is to be done is in communities, in prejudices, in breaking down pockets of isolation is loud work.

When the change happens, a miracle occurs.

Are we ready for those kinds of miracles? Dr. Susan Fleming McGurgan, (Atheanaem of Ohio) writes:

it seems like every time we encounter Christ,
we also encounter people who are,
well...
inconvenient.

You know the kind of people I am talking about...
Life is full of them.
Littered with them, really.
Oh, it's not that we're uncaring

or without compassion...
It's just that the journey is so much easier
and quicker
if we don't have to stop for every beggar or loudmouth
who stands by the side of the road.

It is in the words, the transformation brought about by the so called inconvenient people or loudmouths, that miracles take place. For without these loud voices it is just too easy to blindly go along doing what we are doing, unseeing and uncaring of those sitting by the side of the road.

Yesterday I was at the WISE conference, a conference sponsored by the UCC Mental Health Network Ministries. It was a conference that explored the definitions of mental health and mental illness. It explored what it means to break the stigma and the silence of mental health and mental illness.

The conference offered steps a congregation can take to become WISE which stands for:
Welcoming
Inclusive
Supportive
Engaged

This is very different than saying that folks who are different can come here, can attend. One of the speakers explained it this way.

We don't bar the door to anyone entering the building. You can come in.

But if you speak differently in worship, if you raise your hands in praise, if you talk to an unseen person sitting next to you, will you be welcomed?

We won't prevent you from getting a cup of coffee in coffee hour, but will anyone come up and talk to you?

You can come if you have loss in your life. But if you pray publicly for your daughter or son who attempted suicide, will we talk with you about it?

I learned yesterday that mental illness is called the "no casserole disease"

If someone has a brain tumor we show up. We bring a casserole.
If someone has a brain disorder, we don't. No casserole.

And, as such, it is so isolating, even in, or perhaps especially in, the church

What would it be like if we instead said,
"I heard you were depressed or I heard you were hospitalized and I'm so glad you are ok. Can I come over and bring you a casserole, check in and see if ok?"

Can we be a healing place, a place of connection and community, a place where the miracle of isolation broken through occurs?

Mark the gospel writer is making a much larger point with this story. It is about healing of the whole. Last week we heard how disciples arguing over who is greatest. Jesus asks what do you want from me? The answer was honor, glory. They are blind, so blind. In Mark's gospel the disciples come off little better than clueless buffoons.

Jesus asks Bartimaeus what he wants. “To see again.” Bartimaeus didn’t want to see so could go bowling that night or even to run to family and say, hey I’m back. No. He wants to be on the road, on the journey with Jesus. He already can see. Jesus just tweaks his eyes a bit. And with that, he is able to come back into the community, no longer shunned and excluded.

Miraculous.

Are you ready for the miracle? It is not a light question Jesus asks of Bartimaeus or of us.

Are you willing to be loud, to be a bother, to be persistent despite naysayers? And on the other side, are you willing to listen to the loud shouting, to be captured and to stop and listen and work change where you are? Are you ready for the miracle? Are you ready to restore those lost and shunned and excluded, to welcome them in to the community. To love them as they are?

I want to close with a story from Kitchen Table Wisdom a book by Rachel Naomi Remen, a doctor and writer. She writes about a man in one of her cancer support groups. Dieter had escaped from Communist East Germany, and after many years as a refugee had made a new life for himself. Now he was living with cancer.

“For some time now Dieter had suspected that the chemotherapy was no longer helping him. Convinced at last of this, he spoke to his doctor and suggested that the treatments be stopped. He asked, if he could come every week just to talk. His doctor responded abruptly, 'If you refuse chemotherapy, there's nothing more I can do for you.'

“And so Dieter had continued to take the weekly injection in order to have those few moments of connection and understanding with his doctor. The group of people with cancer listened intently. There was another silence. Then Dieter said softly, 'My doctor's love is as important to me as his chemotherapy, but he doesn't know.'

Being listened to, heard, affirmed is the most important gift. The one Jesus gave over and over and over again to those he saw, truly saw, and loved.

We are called to offer that gift as well. And lest we think that this is only a “one way street” that it is only the lost and lonely that are healed by our welcome and affirmation, let me finish Remen’s story.

She continues, “I had yet another connection to Dieter's story. His oncologist, his doctor, was one of my patients. Week after week, from the depths of chronic depression, this physician would tell me that no one cared about him. He didn't matter to anyone. He was just another white coat in the hospital, a mortgage payment to his wife, a tuition check to his son. No one would notice if he vanished, as long as someone was there to make rounds or take out the garbage.”

So here is Dieter bringing the same validation, the same healing to his doctor that he brought to me. But his doctor, caught up in a sense of failure because he cannot cure cancer, cannot receive it.

You are called to be miracle workers in this world. To stand with Jesus in the midst of life, to shout for change from the margins and the edges, to listen, truly listen, to those shouting the truths of love and justice and grace. Whether we use our eyes or not is not the question. The question is do we want to see?

Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me!

Amen.