

A Story from Missouri
Sermon For Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington
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SCRIPTURE READING

Mark 10:32-52

³²They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him, ³³saying, 'See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; ³⁴they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again.'

³⁵James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, 'Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.'
³⁶And he said to them, 'What is it you want me to do for you?' ³⁷And they said to him, 'Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.'
³⁸But Jesus said to them, 'You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?' ³⁹They replied, 'We are able.' Then Jesus said to them, 'The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; ⁴⁰but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.'

⁴¹When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John.

⁴²So Jesus called them and said to them, 'You know that among the

Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. ⁴³But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. ⁴⁵For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.'

⁴⁶They 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. ⁴⁷When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!' ⁴⁸Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, 'Son of David, have mercy on me!' ⁴⁹Jesus stood still and said, 'Call him here.' And they called the blind man, saying to him, 'Take heart; get up, he is calling you.' ⁵⁰So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. ⁵¹Then 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.' ⁵²Jesus said to him, 'Go; your faith has made you well.' Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

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Let me tell you a tale from St. Louis. Katherine Haack was called Sister Superior, but that title was not an indicator of status or station - she was an early leader in the Evangelical Deaconess Society of St. Louis, Missouri. \She was a nurse and one of the first board members for the society formed in 1889, which focused on nursing and supportive care for the poorest members of the St. Louis community.

Within 30 years, “over 30,000 patients had received care — ‘irrespective of creed or nationality.’”¹

According to one record, “St. Louis was the fourth largest city in the U.S. in 1889, rich with many important businesses and cultural institutions but—as with other many fast-growing cities during this period—burdened with poor sanitation, inadequate social services, and blighted housing. Medical care was primitive, even for those who could afford to pay.”² Into that breach stepped the deaconesses, Katherine Haack and 143 others, “to nurse the sick and exercise care for the poor and aged.”³ This happened at a time when nursing was new, and women rarely had professional careers - so the deaconesses were true pioneers.

The deaconesses kept going for a half century - serving immigrant populations, poor and marginalized folks, pioneering both nursing and wholistic care, founding hospitals that still bear their name. (Not BIDMC, by the way - that hospital’s deaconess history is Methodist.)

Katherine Haack, Lydia Daries, Bena Fuchs - through Sister Marie Lee, the very last deaconess nurse who died in 2010⁴ - these deaconesses are our UCC ancestors in faith. It was the German Evangelical tradition - one of our five constituent traditions in the UCC - that founded the Deaconess Society in St. Louis.

¹ <https://www.chsm.org/news/deaconesses-pioneer-professional-women/>

² <https://www.eden.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/04-24-Evangelical-Deaconess-Society.pdf>

³ <https://www.eden.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/04-24-Evangelical-Deaconess-Society.pdf>

⁴ <https://deaconess.org/our-heritage/>



4 early Deaconesses

Now, coming back to our text from Mark this morning -

James and John ask for glory and greatness. In other words, make us Disciples Superior. Oh, the disciples. They're a mess. Glory and greatness are never what Jesus models for them - or for us. Jesus models humility and service.

“But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant,⁴⁴ and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.⁴⁵ For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

Jesus models this with Bartimaeus - whom Jesus serves.

Truly, Jesus is focusing on the needs of the most vulnerable and marginalized person we can imagine -

One who is a blind beggar, literally, whose name means son of one who is unclean,⁵ who throws off his cloak and runs up to Jesus unclothed.

This is one whom Jesus serves. This is the one whom Jesus heals.

And it is this one, even before he is healed, even while he is a blind beggar, unclean and unclothed, who recognized Jesus' saving ministry. Once healed, Bartimaeus follows Jesus' way. Following the way of Jesus -this phrasing is no mistake. The early Christian movement was called the Way.

Those who follow Jesus' way are merciful and compassionate, inclusive and kind, humble and healing.

This brings me back to the Deaconess movement because it is not a historic footnote. It is still part of our United Church of Christ. The Way of the Sisters of old - the way of those Sisters who followed Jesus' way so closely - has not ended. It has changed over time, and is now the Deaconess Foundation of Missouri, still related to the UCC.

The Foundation describes its commitments: "...as the intractable issues of sickness, poverty, and marginalization manifest themselves throughout the ages, the Spirit pursues them through the ministry of successive generations."⁶ The Deaconess Foundation now works in foster care, early childhood intervention, parish nursing, and more. The Deaconess Foundation has connected to us, right here at Pilgrim Church Lexington. Can you guess?

⁵ Bar-Timaeus lit. son of the defiled/unclean -

<https://www.pulpitfiction.com/narrative-notes/232>

⁶ <https://deaconess.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Deaconess-Spirit-Book%C2%A92014.pdf>

In 2020 Pilgrim joined a project pioneered within the UCC by the Deaconess Foundation and Christ the King UCC in Missouri: RIP Medical Debt.⁷ You know this story because through Pilgrim's Mission Committee, you are part of it: buying up medical debt for pennies on the dollar has freed hundreds of thousands of people from millions and millions of dollars in medical debt around the United States (75 million, at last check).⁸

"whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant..."

If we are looking for status or looking to be celebrated, that's not the way of Jesus. Followers of the Way have an ambition to serve.

This week as I considered the visitor we are welcoming today (Meryl Glassman), and the work she will invite us to be part of, I kept coming back to the Deaconesses - focused passionately and humbly on the needs of the most vulnerable people. Focused on concrete and practical needs that were not addressed by any other service in their day. Every time we have the opportunity to serve, we have the opportunity to step onto the same road Bartimaeus walked - to follow the Way of Jesus. May it always be so, in every age.

Amen.

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https://www.ucc.org/ucc_abolishes_12_9_million_in_medical_debt_in_st_louis_continuing_national_initiative/

⁸ <https://www.ucc.org/ucc-med-debt-buys-now-top-75-million/>