

TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

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If we are to look into the Gospel story to find meaning for our lives, which is a highly valid and very acceptable use of the Holy Scriptures, we must look FIRST to the main event of the story. After all, it is what caused the story to be included in the Gospels in the first place. In this case, it is the healing of Bartimaeus. And from there we will see an amazing understanding of the event of our own life in Christ as stewards.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Does it seem too obvious to say, that we look at the main work of God in the story before we start making applications to our lives? But far too often this is not what happens in our bible studies, or our daily reflections. We look at actions, and attitudes, the details and drama in the stories and can walk away thinking we've found our daily inspiration, and never considered the main event itself. Had those early Christians thought that their faith concerned simply their ideas or feelings, or observations, the story of the spread of Christianity would have been very different.

I'm sure glad Jesus didn't just stop, look at the blind man, and yell across the crowd,

"Great voice. You have a nice day now! Be blessed!"

A man was blind! And now he can see! Of course, Amazing Grace! It's not the attributes of the story leading up that make the healing have worth. It is the healing in the man that make any of the attributes worthy of considering as helpful to us who read it later.

Perhaps I should ask, do you even believe the healing took place? With such detail that Mark provides, alone, I have no doubt that it did.

Still, then and now, many people who have such difficulty believing the healing, and who are nonetheless listening, find solace in the relationship of those other parts and items and people of the story.

I spent some time this week looking at one item apart from the main event of the story, as a relic.

Christianity has quite an admiration and respect for relics. Whether in great cathedrals or humble parish churches, the relics of saints are tangible signs of holiness and power. From as early as anyone can tell, Christians preserved the bones and other relics of saints and martyrs. The events of God's work through others remind us

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that God, calls us to holiness in every dimension of our existence—body, soul, and spirit. But there is power in those bones, too.

There's a relic in today's gospel reading.

Jesus demonstrates His divinity by doing something tangible and practical for a blind man who was stuck in life and living. The familiar evidence of His authority was in saying to Bartimaeus, "Go your way; your faith has made you well" and the man immediately was able to see! Can you imagine being there and seeing this transformation? Christ made Bartimaeus a living witness through the healing of his body of the salvation that He has brought to the world. Christ made him a living relic. Jesus did not simply give him ideas, rules, or feelings. He enabled this man to show what happens at the word, at the touch of Jesus, being changed into a complete and whole person. Everyone could plainly see the difference Christ made in this man's life.

Now, that specific item, the other kind of relic, that I was looking at is included in the very, explosive and thus prominent part of this story when, notified that Jesus wanted him to come near, "throwing off his cloak, Bartimaeus sprang up."

I thought about having my cope on until now, and throwing it across the choir. But I figured I would lose the Altar Guild from listening to my sermon from that point on. The dramatic action though would bring attention to the fact that bible teachers have written voluminously on ways to relate to that moment, and to that cloak!

The story has been around for a long time, obviously, and you have to know someone is going to ask about the cloak! Where is it? What color was it? Did someone retrieve it for the man? Did he go back for it after healing? Did the man and his cloak become part of the early Jesus movement after the resurrection?

But I finally reminded myself that the essential story is not about the cloak!! And the cloak cannot eventually be termed a holy relic; certainly it was touching the man when he was crying out, and then involved in the springing up, but..... it was not on him, not touching him when he was healed.

I'd love just from curiosity to know if that cloak was saved by someone. But the real point here is that Bartimaeus himself becomes the living relic perhaps reliquary; his healing makes him a vehicle of grace because God has worked through him. It needed his touch.

Let's just review this quickly.

The cloak may have some reflective meaning, but, in case you were wondering, looking onto the cloak itself as a relic is problematic. The problem is this:

Although throwing it off can be seen in many symbolisms and personal illustrations, it was NOT ON him when he was healed. It might be a relic with power of expectation

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and anticipation, but it is not a relic of God's healing grace coursing through the man at that time...

Not like the Cross itself, upon which Jesus died, and his blood was spilled out for us, parts of being found 300 years later.

Relics are the remains of the vessels who administered God's power. Sounds strange, but remember that in the Old Testament a dead man came back to life when his body was dropped in the grave of the Prophet Elisha and touched his bones. God worked many miracles through the touch of the hands of the Apostles in Acts—and even through the aprons and handkerchiefs of St. Paul and the shadow of St. Peter. And that little detail in Acts is the genesis of the Prayer Shawls and Quilts movement, blessed by the touch of a priest and given to others in hopes of healing.

But if that is the case, then whatever has been made holy by God's touch is in essence a relic, isn't it. It sounds old and dusty, and maybe a little gross, when we use the word, relic. Thing is, anything that has touched the holy no matter how old it is can still be used by God to bring about more of the same works of God as performed by that holy person. That's why relics have always been in such demand in order to insert into a church's altar.

Perhaps, though, a different word might be more useful, like the word reliquary I've been mentioned?

By definition, a reliquary is something that holds relics, such as the tabernacle holds the reserved body and blood of Christ. So even having the reliquary, and perhaps touching it, with relics or sacrament inside of it, can effect healings.

Here's my point, and leading to us understanding something more about stewardship. I want you to consider that Bartimaeus himself was the reliquary, if you will. The things around him that were left behind HIM will not be found to be of interest to the early church as relics. It's him. And maybe what little clothing he had on him when the healing took place. And then to place yourself into that story at that point means you as a Christian, having been made alive in Christ through the Holy Spirit, you might see yourself also as a holy reliquary, one through whom the Holy Spirit can also effect blessing and holiness in others, and upon the church. But instead of preaching that you are holy relics – which still sounds very old, and very left behind – perhaps you'll take it better when I say you are holy reliquaries. Why? Because You are containers of the Holy Spirit. You are the temple of the Holy Spirit.

What you touch as a holy man or woman of God has the potential of being made holy in and of itself. Is this not what we ask of our priests and bishops, and even deacons? Do we not believe that somehow as holy hands are laid upon them, that there is a consecration of God's holiness that is imparted? So the priest at the altar speaks out the words of Christ, touches the precious vessels, lifts them up as an offering to God,

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and we believe it is so, and we receive the sacrament as it is proclaimed? The Body and Blood of Christ?

Yes, there is the calling into the Order of the Church, and the calling gives permission to all others to trust and believe that this sacramental work in the hands of those priests and bishops so ordered actually accomplishes what is being proclaimed and touched as so.

Let us not abandon, however, the truth that as the Holy Spirit has made us alive in Christ, so each one of you are also channels and bearers of the holy. What YOU touch can make things so ordered as holy.

Again, I would say that the things you touch as a holy person by Christ, ALONG with an intention to make what you touch available to others dedicated to Christ will cause that thing to become – if you will – a holy thing and blessing upon the Church. You are the reliquary.

Here I want to introduce the idea of a very direct intentional consequential stewardship. What you give into the offering plate or of yourselves to others, is not leftover, left behind, stuff. You have received from God the Father, and that should be enough to inspire the giving to others, simply as an act of obedience (since he asks us to give in return), or of sacrifice (as with the widows last two pennies). Here, though, is even more of an incentive.

If you had a magic seed, that could produce over 100 times more than your planting, I'd say you had something there. But here is not the seed, nor a magic penny. Giving by You, a holy people, each transformed in your spirit into righteousness, giving by you is the planting. This is not magic; this is God's imprint on you, and your imprint on what YOU touch. What you **touch** and give provides far more than you could imagine. Giving by You is Planting for a purpose in the kingdom of God. It is a holy act. Our mission as the body of Christ is restoring all people to Christ, so then your giving is planting for the purpose of raising up NEW holy people, new saints of God. And doesn't that sound easy to our ears being in a parish named after ALL SAINTS. What you give, touched by you as a vehicle of the holy. is planting for the purpose of raising up new saints right here in this parish.

Let me give you a visual.

[hold up hand] My hand, attached to me as a Christian, baptized, confirmed, washed in the blood of the Lamb, made holy by Christ's work, my hand is thus a vessel of God's holiness. To make it simplistic, what this holy hand touches, also makes holy.

[hold up dollar bill] Here is a dollar bill, and there's nothing particularly holy about it. Yes, it does have authority. It's not just paper. It's paper designated as bearing value. YOU as Christians are not just human beings. You are human beings bearing value and power in Christ. Money does not think. You do.

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So . you come to church with the intention of giving by placing this one dollar bill into the offering plate. as you take hold of that dollar bill, that dollar bill immediately becomes more than just a vessel of barter. It becomes a vessel for the holiness of God. Because you touched it. Because You have been made holy in Christ.

You, the reliquary, have introduced into the treasury a relic.

And then to close this loop, we acknowledge that the sacrifices of giving here though All saints will affect what happens here. Give more as planting, and you are investing more in the existence of and growth of more and more saints right here.

As Jesus the Son of God, came as Messiah, and thus fulfilled the desire of God from the Isaiah prophecy, so you now carry on the same as the Body of Christ. God is looking for us to step up, to be the Givers that will bring more saints into being.

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