

“Following Jesus”

First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson
October 28, 2018

Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 34:4-8

New Testament Lesson: Mark 10:46-52

In his book titled *A Problem with Presence: Beyond Scripture in an African Church*, Matthew Engelke tells how encountering Bible stories about Jesus like the one we just heard actually changed everything for one particular man.

This man lived in an African village that was visited one day by a member of the Bible Society of Zimbabwe. The visitor, named Gaylord Kambarami, was distributing copies of the New Testament, but the man refused to take it, saying he couldn't stand the Word of God.

He said he “could only accept it if (he were) allowed ... to use the pages of the New Testament for smoking purposes.” (In remote village, ... people use newspaper and whatever else they can find to roll their cigarettes.) Gaylord said, “Fine, on one condition: read each page before you smoke.” The man agreed.

Two years later, Gaylord return to the area to speak at a convention. As he began, the same man stood up and said, “Please, let me say a few words.... This man doesn't remember me because when I last saw him I was a drunkard. But he came to our village and persuaded me to take the Bible.

I told him I would use the paper to roll cigarettes. But I promised to read each page before doing so, which I did. So I smoked my way through Matthew. And I smoked the whole of Mark, too. Then I smoked Luke. I started smoking John, but when I came to John 3:16 a light shone in my face. And now I am a churchgoing person. I saw the light.”

The man had read story after story about Jesus changing the lives of those who encountered him, and in doing so he realized the same miracle was being offered to him as he encountered Jesus through the Bible. John 3:16: “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son....” Jesus came into the world to change our lives for the better, to work miracles in your life.

In order for Jesus to work such miracles, we need to meet him along our journey. We need to meet him everyday and be ready to follow wherever he takes us.

In today's New Testament lesson, a blind beggar is sitting by the roadside, something he has no doubt done everyday since losing his sight. Jesus comes by and he shouts out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" And Mark tells us that everyone orders him to be quiet. Why?

Well, Jesus is an important person with lots of followers and places to go. Can't you imagine him with this large crowd following as he's leaving Jericho and some beggar calls out to stop him?

We've seen this type of thing in our own lives, haven't we? We're walking down the street with friends or turning the corner in our car and someone is begging for money. If you're like me, you don't know where the money might go. So maybe you offer to buy some food instead. Sometimes the person takes it, sometimes they don't.

Sometimes there are conditions before they'll accept your help, like the man in Africa who would only take the Bible if he could use it to roll cigarettes.

We can't be certain just how Jesus will work in our lives or the life of another person. All we know is that we are called to follow him, to make an effort to know Jesus more and have that change who we are.

That man in Africa put in the time reading before smoking, and he got his whole life out of it, out of hearing about the miracles of Jesus. Having your life changed for the better always takes something. Miracles happen when we make an effort to relate our lives to our faith and then follow where that leads us, whether you're the one in need or the one who can help.

It's a little different, but I'd like to pause at this time and invite Doug Cowen of the Community Services League to present our Minute for Mission in the midst of the sermon, to tell us about the people they help with their programs, programs that this church and its members support year after year, through both volunteer hours and your pledges. All these programs are examples of people who have stepped out in faith either as the ones who can help or as those in need.

(Doug's presentation)

So, like Doug said, the Community Services League is committed to helping people help themselves, helping people find a better way forward. God is working through the Community Services League and God is working through this church.

The Lord gave of himself for the sake of others, and he calls us to give likewise, so that others might be blessed by miracles, miracles they can't yet see or image.

Before meeting Jesus, that blind man in today's Bible lesson couldn't imagine the miracle that awaited him. That man in Africa before accepting the Bible, couldn't imagine being an upstanding follower of Christ. And before any of us took Jesus into our hearts, we couldn't imagine being able to bless the lives of others through our faith in God our participation at this church.

God works miracles when we have faith to step out beyond our imaginations, beyond what might seem possible.

Jesus calls to the blind man, the blindness in all of us, and says, "What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus wants to know what we believe might be possible in our lives, in your life.

The blind man in the Bible says, "My teacher let me see again." Where once he begged for money, now he prays for clarity, that he might see his way forward to a better life. We are all trying to find our way forward in life. We are all trying to imagine what might be possible in making this a better world. To live into that, we all need the clarity to see where Jesus would lead us, the faith to believe that God can work miracles in our lives and in our world.

In the end, Jesus turns to the blind man and says, "Go, your faith has made you well." Immediately, he regains his sight and follows Jesus "on the way." On the way where? At that moment, he doesn't know for sure. But the man is ready to follow, wherever Jesus might lead him.

That is the miracle of the blind man – not regaining his eyesight, but following Jesus. And that is the miracle for us all. All the miracles God wants to work in our lives – in your life – come from reaching out to Jesus and having the faith to follow, in whatever way he leads you, whether you are one in need or as one who can help. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

O God, we thank you that you have called us your children. We are thankful for your provision, your guidance and your unending love for us.

As your children, help us to follow your lead and honor your Spirit in our hearts and in our actions.

Around our country and around the world, we pray for peace and civility where there is hatred and divisiveness, comfort and healing where there is loss and injury, and particularly for those reeling from the violence in Pittsburgh, shaken by this week's failed attacks on a national figure, and struggling at the borders of nations to respond in ways that affirm your divine love and provision, shelter and protection.

O Lord, keep us from thinking we can live in our own power and strength, wisdom and judgment. Help us look to you for guidance and give us hearts to follow wherever you lead us, as a nation, as a global people, as families and communities.

Just as children depend on their parents, let us depend on you for all that we need. We pray, also, for those we keep in prayer who need your healing touch and comforting Spirit, especially for:

Lord, you know us better than we know ourselves. As we worship and pray together, let us rest in that truth and live in the joy of being the children of God, as together we follow our children here in the Lord's Prayer:

Children: Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;

Congregation: Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Children: Give us this day our daily bread;

Congregation: And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.

Children: And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,

Congregation: For thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever. Amen.