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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
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Lectionary Year B: Mark 10:46-52

"What do you want me to do for you?", Jesus asks. Wouldn't it have already been clear that Bartimaeus was blind? I am intrigued by Bartimaeus' persistence in calling out to Jesus, so perhaps Jesus, by this point, has grown a bit tired of these pleas for attention, to the point that he basically asks, "Okay, what is it now?" We know, too, that the bystanders present were telling him to knock it off, so we can conclude that he must've been making quite a scene...

I can recall that, as a child, one way of getting something I wanted was quite simple -- I harangued my parents constantly with the hope that they'd eventually capitulate, which they usually did. My Dad found this to be a pretty effective strategy with his parents, too. Ask for something about fifty times, get about fifty answers of "no," but there was always that fifty-first or so answer that was a grudging, "Okay, here you go!"

Another example of this is from a church I attended a couple of times years ago; this particular congregation was formed out of two older congregations that had merged. They had called an interim pastor whose job was to raise funds for the building of a new church for them to move into. It didn't matter what the Scripture texts were for any given Sunday -- blind Bartimaeus or

the parable of the ten bridesmaids -- the pastor always managed to squeeze in an appeal for money to build the new church.

Guess what? The church got built.

But just because haranguing is an effective strategy doesn't make it the best strategy. Had I attended that church regularly where the pastor was always asking for money, I know I would've grown tired of it week after week, fifty-two weeks out of the year. So this makes preaching during a season of stewardship emphasis particularly challenging for me. But the challenge is actually one that is kind of fun to accept. It requires me to talk about stewardship without haranguing. Believe me, haranguing is not fun -- for me, at least.

The story of Bartimaeus, while it begins with a harangue, doesn't have haranguing as its central feature. The central feature, obviously, is healing. But let's examine some of the details leading up to that. It is mentioned that Bartimaeus threw off his cloak (Mark 10:50a), and, if you can imagine a blind beggar on the side of the road, that cloak would've had many functions. It would've provided shelter from the elements, warmth when it was cold, and a blanket to spread out for the collection of coins from passersby. When we think about his cloak this way, it becomes pretty clear that his cloak was everything to him.

When Jesus stops and calls to Bartimaeus, the text says, "So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus" (Mark 10:50). For whatever reason, his cloak wasn't so important any-

more. This then leads to the pivotal scene in which Jesus asks, "What do you want me to do for you?" Bartimaeus names his wish, "My teacher, let me see again" (Mark 10:51c), and we know where things go from there.

Notice how, in spite of how stupid Jesus' question sounds, Bartimaeus is required to identify his problem or need. There's really nothing wrong with that; in fact, as an example, it's the first thing anyone in a twelve-step program mentions right after they say their name. It puts it out there, so there's no lack of clarity or opportunity for misunderstanding. In my line of work, and perhaps in yours, as well, this is of utmost importance.

Vague statements, attributed to simultaneously anyone and no one, are the most frustrating and difficult to resolve things we can deal with. "Somebody said something to the effect that something's wrong with the way you're dealing with something..." Huh?

It is much more helpful when you say, "I have a problem with...", and name something specific.

Bartimaeus names it: "My teacher, let me see again."

So let's think about naming the need and then let's think about our cloaks, because we, like Bartimaeus, have cloaks, too.

Around this time of year, it is good for us to name the need.

There are three needs, actually: Time, talent, and treasure.

These are the things that our church needs to thrive. We need

your time in terms of your simply being here. We need your talent

in terms of your hearts, hands, and voices. We need your treasure in terms of the dollar amount you offer in support of it all. But rather than turning this into an extended harangue for money, let's think about our cloaks.

We're probably not like Bartimaeus in that our cloaks are everything to us. Yet we put on cloaks that aren't always visible -- perhaps a cloak of security by way of a material good that shields us from our anxieties and fears. It could be, as well, a bad habit to help us avoid something we don't want to do. In my case, I'm a master procrastinator when it comes to things like this; my garage still needs to be organized, but I can find a thousand things to do in that garage besides organizing it! But if you think for a moment about these quirks and deficiencies of character of ours, it becomes clear that they are cloaks to cover our tendencies toward anxiety and avoidance; we can put a cloak over them and not have to deal with them, then.

And, if you have it, money is a terrific cloak. You can hide a lot of stuff if you can pay to have it hidden. But what does that accomplish? Sure, it can improve your appearance, but it can't improve your substance. The reason why people are generous is because it makes them feel better than being greedy. And if we continue to throw cloaks over ourselves, we'll eventually smother ourselves. But if we throw off a cloak or two, we, like Bartimaeus, spring up in faith and become free.

Yes, it took faith for Bartimaeus to throw off his cloak. It was

everything to him; it was his shelter, his warmth, his collection plate. What's going to take its place? He doesn't know, but to live happily with that kind of uncertainty is the essence of faith. Likewise, the money that you give to the church could be used to pay some bills of your own, but, like Bartimaeus, you too can live happily with that kind of uncertainty. Then you might find that throwing off a cloak or two is not terrifying, but instead liberating.

What were Jesus' final words to Bartimaeus? "Go, your faith has made you well" (Mark 10:52a). Yes, it took faith for him to throw off that cloak, and what follows is his restoration of sight. Imagine what might happen when we throw off a cloak or two, both in ourselves and in our church.

See, no haranguing is necessary. When we envision what we can be through Christ's liberating grace, it's a lot easier to respond in faith happily and with generosity. Let us, therefore, name our needs and cast off our cloaks accordingly.

Amen.