

Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time, cycle B

By [Don L. Fischer](#)

SCRIPTURE: Jeremiah 31:7-9; Hebrews 5:1-6; Mark 10:46-52

All of the stories we listen to in Scripture come within a context. To understand the stories, to get the full meaning found in them, we need to understand where they are placed and why they are placed there and what happened just before. We also need to know what will come after. I want to begin this reflection on these readings by trying to place the gospel story within its context. First of all, we have just finished a long section in this particular gospel where we keep running against one of the problems Jesus had with his disciples, and that was their lack of understanding. He has explained three times to them that he must go to Jerusalem to suffer and to be humiliated, to give himself over to sin — and then to rise. Remember Peter's reaction when he first heard this: "We cannot stand the thought of someone as wonderful, as good and as powerful as you going through something as awful as this. This is a terrible idea." Jesus says: "Get behind me, Satan." There is a way in which Jesus brings this subject of his suffering up again, and his disciples don't seem to be able to even ask questions about it. No sooner does Jesus finish this explanation than his disciples get into a major argument about who among them is the greatest. Jesus reveals it again, and the same thing happens. They don't seem to be able to talk about it much or to ask questions with any kind of real intelligence. The next thing that happens (after Jesus has revealed that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer) is that two of his disciples — James and John — approach him and simply say, "Can we have the seats at your right and your left? We'd like to be in a position of power."

What I want you to understand with me is that all of these stories seem to be about Jesus revealing something that was difficult for them to grasp about the kingdom. It seems to me that what Jesus was really trying to say is that we are all called to be in service to something greater than ourselves, and this place called the kingdom is not about being in a position of power, it is not about being the best or the greatest. It's not about looking really good in the world. It is about something quite different. That's where Jesus felt the block. It was such a radical, different way of seeing. Let me translate this mistaken thinking in the way I believe it works in you and in me: It means that one of the things I think God wants me to do is to look really good. He wants me to achieve success. He wants me to be past my sins. He wants me to be insightful. And so, if I can prove myself to be those things, if I can present myself to him and to myself in a way that looks really good, where I can say, "I am a great follower," then I would feel more confident. I would especially be more confident of God's love for me. The way this works is that many of us are asking not only to be great in God's eyes but to be great in our own eyes. When we see ourselves as not quite as great as we should be, when we find ourselves caught in mistakes and failures, when we recognize that the goal we thought we would achieve is far from our reach, we end up being filled with self-hatred and self-loathing. We end up being people who have major problems in terms of self-acceptance and self-love. We all know where that leads. A person who doesn't believe, trust or love themselves is super-critical of themselves and will almost always project that on everyone around them.

Jesus is trying to get to the heart of this problem: How does he get us to enter into his kingdom, to follow him on this way, to go to Jerusalem — a symbol of going into this work of fulfilling our destiny as one who gives themselves over to things, who accepts the plan of God? This always includes our weaknesses and our sins. How does Jesus get us to do that? The only way we can do that is to believe it, to trust in it. It's an act of faith. It doesn't necessarily feel logical. I feel much more confident when I am standing in front of people when I think those people look at me and say, "What an incredibly wonderful person." It's very hard for me to stand in front of someone looking like a jerk, looking like a failure, and expecting love from that person. What God is trying to reveal to us (and this is a great mystery!) is that there is almost more love for us when we are standing there naked and broken than when we are standing there sleek and strong. It's like we have the whole thing backwards. We think we are going to achieve love from God and some sort of esteem and love from other people by being sleek and strong. When we think about it, people don't really love people for their ability to be sleek and strong. They may like that person for other reasons. Usually what we are drawn to most in terms of loving other people (believe it or not!) is their need to be loved. Their response to being loved. When I see somebody who really needs me, and I move in their life and I can see I have really achieved something, then I feel really connected to them. I don't necessarily feel connected to people for whom I want to applaud their performance. I may honor them. I may respect them. I may think they are really high achievers. But I often don't even feel connected to those people very much. It's amazing how we feel more connected to people who struggle like we struggle.

In the gospel story, we find Jesus with his entourage leaving Jericho for Jerusalem. That means he is on his way to this place where he is going to suffer. The direction he is walking toward is the place of vulnerability, of littleness, of powerlessness. When we embrace all of that, we enter into this new place called the kingdom. In the kingdom there is new life, there is resurrection. Now there is a figure, Bartimaeus, who is a symbol of all of us. One of the things that is so wonderful about this story is that here is a man who recognizes that he is blind. He is a beggar. One of the things we see him in contrast to is the blindness of the disciples, who will not look at their lack of seeing as blindness. They just think that what they are looking at isn't a very good idea. It's a very subtle difference between looking at something and saying, "There's nothing there," when actually there is, and somebody looking and saying, "I can't see it. I know it must be there." That second person is symbolized in Bartimaeus. He knows he is blind; he is a beggar. What I love about the story is that Jesus is walking through this town and this figure Bartimaeus has heard about Jesus. He's heard about him, and he thinks Jesus is a great wonder worker. He actually calls Jesus by a name that is very rare in the Scripture. It's been used when demons call out to Jesus and when Peter makes his confession of faith. The name he calls Jesus is "Son of David." Bartimaeus recognizes Jesus as the Messiah. Bartimaeus yells out, "I want some help. Help me." I want you to imagine that these kinds of figures in the Old Testament and the New Testament are always seen by people in the culture as people who are unattractive to God. Beggars. Blind people. Lame people. Dumb people. Deaf people. Imperfect people. These people are seen as people who are not in God's favor. They are seen as people God is not attracted to, because they are not the sleek and strong. Right away, the people around Bartimaeus try to quiet him. They say, "Come on. Quiet. Don't yell for the master. You're just a beggar. You have no real value or importance."

All of a sudden, Jesus gets wind of this and says, "I want that one to come over to me." The crowd looks at Bartimaeus and says, "Well, maybe you don't have anything to fear

because it looks like he is calling you.” When Bartimaeus comes over, Jesus asks him what he wants him to do. That is such a wonderful line, because God is always saying this to human beings: “What can I do for you.” Not so much what are we supposed to do for God. How high we are supposed to go in order to reach perfection for God. Jesus says, “I am a servant God. I am representing the servant Father. I want you to tell me what you need.” Bartimaeus responds by simply saying, “I would love to see.” This is another way of saying, “I would love to understand the kingdom. I would love to know what this is all about. I’d love to understand more fully who I am and what this is all about. It seems really confusing to me.” Jesus says, “That’s exactly what I have come to do. I have come to show you. So, if you look at me, you can expect to see the truth. I will let you see me. I will heal your blindness.” That’s another way of saying that Jesus is opening us up with grace so that we can understand the mystery of the kingdom. The kingdom is rooted in powerlessness, emptiness, and frailty. That’s what God loves, and that’s what God works with best. Then, Bartimaeus does what Jesus wants more than anything else. He walks with him to Jerusalem.

Let’s look at the image we have of God in the first reading from Jeremiah. He is calling people to come back home. I love that image. Come back home. You’ve been sent away, you’ve been in pain and struggles. God wants us to come home, a place where he makes the deep valleys level. God wants to bring us to a place of nourishment. God wants to bring us to a place where there is water, where there is life. That’s always been the choice. God has always wanted to bring us back. He says, “When I gather you from the ends of the world, I will also gather the blind and the lame, those who are struggling to give life.” These are the people who make up the kingdom. I love that image! It’s always been there. The people in the kingdom are those who recognize that they don’t understand, that they don’t see, that they can’t figure it all out. Rather than saying, “If I can’t figure it out, I can’t believe it,” they are willing to say, “I can’t figure it out. I am lost. I need nourishment. I need to come home. I need to be shown. I am trying to give birth to a new child.” The image of a woman giving birth to a child in the Old Testament is an image of all of us — male and female — in a relationship with God. God is the masculine element who is really calling us into a fruitful life where we give birth to new life inside of us.

Notice how the reading from Hebrews talks about the role of priest — the role of one who acts in the role of Jesus. One of the prerequisites for this role, the writer of Hebrews says, is that the priest has to be comfortable with people’s weaknesses, to not separate oneself from those people. That person has to recognize their own sin and imperfection. A minister who is not in touch with their own sin and imperfection is not going to be a very good minister. He’s asking us to recognize that those who are called to serve are filled with a kind of patience. They are called to possess a willingness with the ignorant and the erring because they themselves are ignorant and erring — and beset by weaknesses. In all of these readings, there’s a wonderful way in which we are invited to see differently. We are invited to see religion differently. Religion can come across as a discipline that’s demanding we shape up our lives and turn into these wonderful people. Then and only then, do we connect with a God who applauds and recognizes and loves us for being such good children! That can be the biggest obstacle. In place of that is this wonderful image of a God who loves the sinner, the broken, and asks first and foremost that we recognize our weakness, our sin, our brokenness. That’s who we are; that’s who we all are. We have no business judging one another or working against one another when we find each other weak. We have every reason to bond together and to walk with this God who continues to love, to nurture, to call us home to a place of wholeness that includes the recognition that we are not yet all that we will be.

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