October 28, 2018
Mark 10:46-52
Through the eyes of the vulnerable

Rev. Kerry Smith
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Mark 10:46-52 New Revised Standard Version

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

Many years ago I was leading a weekly Bible study. I had printed out questions and placed them around the table at people’s seats. I was pleasantly surprised to have a new person join the Bible study that day. This person had been coming to worship for a few weeks and he was blind. As I welcomed him into the room, I realized that I was not prepared for him. I had not taken into account that to fully participate in the study that I had prepared, you had to be sighted. It made me aware of how easy it is for me to not take into account the experience of the vulnerable. I am still learning each and every day, but that day helped me to open myself to how others experience different situations.

 In our scripture we hear a story about someone who is blind. His name is Bartimaeus. He hears that Jesus is coming and he begins to shout to get Jesus’ attention. Bartimaeus cries out that Jesus is the merciful Son of David and the crowd cannot silence him. The crowd tries to silence his cries for help, but he just shouts louder. People are trying to shush him into respectful silence but he yells even louder. I love it! I wonder why the crowd wants him to be quiet. Is it because they want him to conform? Or maybe they want him to not bring attention to how he is different from others? In Jesus’ time blindness and poverty were seen as signs of a punishment for sin. Maybe the crowd is embarrassed to have such a sinner call out to Jesus. Whatever the reason, Bartimaeus just gets louder. He will not be silenced.

 There are a lot of stories about Jesus healing someone who is blind. In one of the stories Jesus touches the eyes of the person. In another Jesus puts his saliva on their eyes. In one Jesus makes a paste mixing his saliva with dirt to make mud. In this story, Jesus doesn’t touch Bartimaeus. Jesus doesn’t pat him on the back or hold his hand. Jesus respects Bartimaeus’ space. He calls Bartimaeus over and the crowd changes their tune. In the Message translation which is more of a paraphrase, the crowd tells Bartimaeus, “It’s your lucky day! Get up! He’s calling you to come!” Bartimaeus wants to see again and Jesus tells him his faith has saved him and healed him. In other healing stories, Jesus tells folks to keep quiet about it, but Jesus does not tell that to Bartimaeus. Jesus only tells Bartimaeus, “Go, your faith has made you well.”

There are three characters in the story: Bartimaeus, Jesus, and the silencing crowd. Bartimaeus has courage, he is going to tell his story. He will not be silent. The world hasn’t been able to crush Bartimaeus’ hope, he trusts that Jesus will have mercy on him. Jesus listens to him, Jesus respects his boundaries, and Jesus makes him whole. The silencing crowd doesn’t want their lives interrupted by poverty or disability or stories of hurt and pain. Bartimaeus teaches us that it is okay to cry out to Jesus, and he reminds us that when we do Jesus hears us and calls out to us.

In 2006, activist and survivor advocate Tarana Burke created the Me Too movement as a way for survivors to support one another, to know that they were not alone in what they had experienced. She wanted people to know that they could not be silenced. In 2017, the #metoo hashtag went viral as people shared their story and silence was broken again and again. Church is shiny sometimes and we don’t like to talk about things that may make people uncomfortable. We aren’t sure how to support survivors and we definitely don’t know what to do with the perpetrators.

Today is called Break the Silence Sunday, a day when churches speak out about the tragedy of domestic violence. It is a day for us to remember that each minute, twenty people are victims of domestic violence in the United States. How can we create a community where survivors feel invited to share their stories and find support, hope, and love? How can we be advocates for change in our communities and around the world?

As we have seen with the Catholic Church, the church is often responsible for the hurt and abuse. We think that the church should be better, but it is filled with sinful human beings. Too often the survivors share their stories with the church and are met with doubt, shame, victim blaming or bad theology. We should be a church that meets survivors with support, encouragement and companionship. Suffering should never be done alone. May we witness to pain, and strength; to questions, and faith. May we commit ourselves to being a listening people, and a people dedicated to changing the reality of violence in the world.

We come to this place for healing, to be seen and know as we are, and to be freed from what has kept us bent over with shame and fear. Our God is one of hope, of companionship, and of justice. I hope that we can all say that we are a person who can say to others: I want to hear your story and I will listen without judgement. I will honor your story and remind you of the dignity and worth you have as a child of God, created in God’s own image, and I will remind you that you are more than your story. I am here for you, and with you. I stand with you. I believe you.

 For the last nineteen years, we have hosted Narcotics Anonymous meetings here at Greenland Hills. Eleven times each week, people gather to share their stories, to share their failures, and to find a place where people say today is a new day. People are reminded that God loves them and that God has heard their cries. I remember getting a call about the death of someone who participated in the Narcotics Anonymous group. The family wanted to have the funeral here because they said that this was their home, this was their community. We open our doors and provide a space for people to share their story and to find support and love, and to change their lives.

 One of my favorite Psalms is Psalm 147 that says God heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds. I need to be reminded of those words on a day when my heart breaks for the eleven who lost their lives yesterday during worship on a Sabbath morning at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh. It is believed to be the deadliest attack on the Jewish community in the history of the United States.

 I need to be reminded about Bartimaeus who had the strength to cry out for help, and then to shout louder. He would not be quiet. He wanted to see again, he wanted to be healed, he wanted to find peace and joy and strength and to feel the Holy Spirit with him and Jesus told him his faith made him well. And he regained his sight and followed Jesus on the way.

We don’t know how we are going to be changed when we cry out for help. We don’t know how we are going to be changed when we move toward the presence of Almighty God, but we know that we will not remain the same. Jesus heals us, but Bartimaeus’ strength and his persistence are necessary to make that restoration possible. Today may we know that God gives us new eyes to see that we are free from our past, free from our fear, and free from our pain. That is the good news for us today, Alleluia. May God shine God’s light on us, in us and through us and may we become bearers of that light for others who dwell in silence. May we have the strength and persistence of Bartimaeus to reach out to Jesus. Amen.