

Form Me and Re-form Me
Twenty-Second Sunday After Pentecost
Reformation Sunday
October 25, 2015
Rev. Shari K. Brink

Text: Jeremiah 31: 7-9, Psalm 126: 1-6, Mark 10: 46-52

Let's dig into the scripture together today, shall we? Allow me to begin with this personal reflection.

I like to walk and think and recently, I don't know why it popped into my mind, but I was stopped rather dead in my tracks by a memory of myself. It was an image of myself, alone in my church office – probably in 1995 – I would have been 30-something – working on a sermon. I was a relatively new minister – co-pastor of a church not unlike Hope Church, and things were going well. And I remember this moment of, well, exuberance, and thinking to myself *“Wow! I am doing really well spiritually. It feels good. My faith is strong. It's solid. I've got this faith thing down. I don't think it can ever be broken!”*

Well, “ever” is a long, long time! ☺ These days – maybe it's because I'm a relatively new president of a place with sizeable training programs and 30+ therapists and we're trying to figure out how to meet MORE of the mental health needs in NYC – a city that, on so many levels, never seems to have enough. But it's more than that. I think it's a function of the human condition, so that these days, I'm more likely to pray *“God, show me the way. I need you. Keep my eyes open for the “bread crumbs” you sprinkle in my path, showing me, by your Spirit, the way to go. God, please don't let me become over-confident. Help me find the way forward.”*

And so, today, the 50-something me looks back on the 30-something me and is rather amused. And maybe a little envious too! But amused that I could once have had such confidence, such a thought of spiritual “self-sufficiency”... and, most of all, such naiveté about how much “life” was ahead.

“It's a hard knock life,” you know. [I'd sing that line if I could!] If it's not a health challenge, its finances; and if it's not finances, it's something else about our changing workplaces, and if it's not any of those, it's our parents or our children, or the challenges of relationships. *“It's a hard knock life.”*

The 30-something Shari Brink eventually learned – after a “knock” or 2 or 3 [or 7 or 8] that “life happens” and – as it does, it's a humbling process – a process of breaking and remaking that happens for each of us... on our way to becoming more-and-more the person God created us to be! And if we can “go with” life, soften ourselves and let it shape us, then that process takes off the “rough edges.” We become more of who God created us to be in the first place.

And so, as I read today's Gospel story from Mark, it occurred to the 50-something me that I am more like “blind Bartimaeus,” the visually impaired man who was sitting at the side of the road, than ever before in my life – and that's a good thing! I find myself willing to cry out *“Jesus, stop! Hold on! Take note of me. I need you. I can't do it on my own.”*

And if the 50-something me is like Bartimaeus, the 30-something me who thought I “had it all together,” was more like the crowds. Like the crowds who told Bartimaeus to be quiet – and who were perhaps a little embarrassed at his shameless naming of his need. A younger me would have been surprised at my readiness, today, to call out to God in need.

She wouldn't have thought to say *“God, I need you. In spite of the fact that I'm smart, I'm competent, and my resume looks good, I need you. I've got challenges in life that I'd really rather not handle on my own.”* Wouldn't have said it.

And even saying it now feels really vulnerable. But yet, this is what faith is about. Jesus said to Bartimaeus, *“Your faith has made you well. Your willingness to show your need has made you well.... Your willingness to show your need and to believe in my power, these have made you well.”* Do you see it? Without that component of need, it’s not really faith. It’s self-sufficiency, reliance on ourselves as if we could do it on our own! Faith means needing God. It’s a truth that seems so basic to what we proclaim, but for high-functioning people, it goes against our grain.

The truth is that in our culture, crying out like Bartimaeus isn’t really respectable. Self-sufficiency is respectable. And so we have all sorts of unwritten rules that say “it’s not OK to ask for what we need,” to “be needy.” And so we end up expecting people to know what we need without us having to ask. We’re irritated that they don’t seem to know. Part of being people of faith, reliant on God, is the humility to know we can’t go it on our own!

I note that Jesus made Bartimaeus say it. Wasn’t it obvious what Bartimaeus wanted!? But yet, Jesus asked him, “What do you want me to do for you?” And Bartimaeus responded with “disarming clarity.” He throws off his cloak, springs up, and comes running to Jesus with great expectation. Bartimaeus knows exactly what he is in need of: *“Rabbouni, Teacher, let me see again.”* He knew his need and he believed that Jesus could do something about it.

What is the need that would have you springing toward Jesus? Jesus asked Bartimaeus *“What is it you want me to do for you?”* and Bartimaeus was ready with his answer. What about you?

As you heard earlier, many of us were at the 10th Anniversary Gathering of Room for All, a movement of individuals and churches working for the fuller inclusion of LGBT people in the RCA, a movement that you, as Hope Church are a part of. Together, we’re working to make more clear on earth what is already true in heaven – that God has created and claimed LGBTQ people as part of the beautiful diversity of God’s people. I hadn’t been to the conference since 2011 and was struck by what I experienced as a deepening spirituality of those who are a part of this movement.

If we take on the challenge of co-creating with God a world that is more like the one God intends – whether that’s through working for LGBTQ inclusion, or addressing the deeply entrenched racism that is still a part of American society, or addressing hunger and poverty – it will take us deeper into our faith – deeper into the recognition that we can’t do it on our own – that we’re just going to have to trust in God – deeper into a recognition of our own reliance on God, a recognition of our need and God’s power. It will require of us a spirituality equal to the challenges before us.

So whether it’s the “knocks” of life or participating with God in remaking the world, to come to the point of being able to say “I need”... to go through those times of being broken and remade, is to say “Form me, God. Form me and RE-form me.” Make of me what you will.

“Form me and RE-form me, O God.” It’s a phrase that, perhaps, sounds vaguely familiar. Today is Reformation Sunday, and so I’m invoking that Reformation mantra, *“Reformed and ever reforming.”* As Reformed people, faith isn’t just about us as individuals. It IS about each of us, but it’s also about ALL of us together as God’s people and the way we travel life’s road together.

And so the lectionary pairs this story of Bartimaeus – an individual of faith – together with Jeremiah 31 and Psalm 126 – stories of the community of faith.

Just as Mark 10 has Bartimaeus crying out *“Son of David, have mercy on me,”* in Jeremiah, the prophet encourages God’s people living in exile to cry out *“Save, O Lord, your people, the remnant of Israel.”* And in that psalm, a later generation calls out *“Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like the watercourses in the Negev.”*

This Psalm is one of the “Psalms of Ascent.” In the generations following their ancestors’ return from exile, the Jewish people would travel to Jerusalem for the major festivals, streaming in from all over the countryside. And as they climbed the road to Jerusalem – a City set on a Hill – they would remind themselves of how God had brought their people back from exile. And the stories of how God had met the needs of an earlier generation – like a dream come true – would give them courage to cry out for deliverance in their own day.

Thinking about this psalm, I began to think, Hope Church, do you know that you are like that earlier generation, returned from exile? ☺ You, as a church, are a sign of hope to many – yes, you are “HOPE Church.” Just as one generation’s return from exile fueled the faith of future generations, that they too would be restored, so your story, as a church, is fueling the faith of others. Here’s what I mean. On Thursday evening at the Room for All opening banquet at the Van Andel Museum in Grand Rapids, the speaker for the evening – from another denomination – told how, during a conference at Grand Valley State, she had heard Hope Church lifted up for its Welcome of LGBTQ people – a sign of hope to those who were there. And in a workshop 2 days ago, Pastor Gordon and Pastor Jill talked about your journey together – over more than 30 years – sorting out, step-by-step, your inclusion of LGBTQ people.

Your willingness to engage the difficult questions is a model of what it means to be “*Reformed and ever reforming,*” taking on the difficult questions of the day. You have modeled that each generation must discern for itself what it means to be true to God’s love and grace in that day. And because you have, you inspire others as they climb their way toward Jerusalem. You are a “First Wave” Room for All congregation (the first in Michigan!), fueling the faith and the restlessness of others on a similar journey.

I am struck by Jeremiah’s image of a “great company” that is finding its way to Jerusalem, the City of God. It’s an image that prefigures the one we find at the end of the Bible in the book of Revelation of people from every tribe and tongue and nation, being gathered together in the New Jerusalem – a New Heaven and a New Earth – a place of healing and hope, where sorrow and mourning will be no more because ALL things will be made new.

Indeed, Jeremiah said in his day that the Great Company returning to Jerusalem, would be made up of people gathered from “the farthest parts of the earth,” among them, on the one hand, “the blind and the lame” and, on the other hand, “those with child and those in labor.” In other words, in Jeremiah’s day, the Great Company included those who were suffering and excluded from society and those who are laboring to bring forth something new! That Community of Longing is all headed in the same general direction, with Jerusalem in their sites.

And in our day, we too are a Great Company of Faith, living in the long in-between-time until God’s kingdom is fully realized. As a Church – the Church of Jesus Christ of which Hope Church is a part but certainly not the full church – as the Church of Jesus Christ we are God’s people together. As we envision that worldwide Company of Faith, we remember that in our midst are

- Teens, just coming to understand themselves as gay, some of them being put out of their homes because of it. 40% of homeless teens in NYC are Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Transgender
- Transgender women of color, living in fear for their lives each and every day, because they have seen 22 people who look like themselves – already this year – murdered in violent hate crimes.
- Black and Latino people and other people of color, who continue to suffer the day-after-day, generation-after-generation trauma of racism that is alive and well in our country
- And a refugee family in a rubber boat, looking for a better life for their children
- The person suffering silently from depression...
- And another who feels alone as they give care to a family member...
- And another who worries that tomorrow their job may disappear...
- And many others who, though they look so very competent, are filled with need as well
- And the list goes on.

This is who we are, a Great Company of Need, but a Company of Faith and Hope and Belonging, traveling together, doing our best to partner with God in birthing something New. In a moment we will remind ourselves of that “Most Excellent” of all questions from the Heidelberg Catechism, Question & Answer #1: “What is my only comfort in life and in death?” What is our only comfort as we wind our way up to the New Jerusalem? Our “only comfort is life and in death is that we are not our own, but that we belong [to each other and] to our faithful savior Jesus Christ...” We belong – each of us belongs – ALL of us belong – to the Body of Christ, a Great Company of Need and Faith, Hope and Belonging.

We belong. We belong to a community of faith, Reformed and Ever Reforming – a community of pilgrims winding our way to the New Jerusalem, praying “Form US and RE-form US, as your people, O God – pilgrims in need, doing our best to birth the New Jerusalem, to make manifest God’s kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

As we live in the long in between time, may we together, become more and more a sign that God is working in the world. And may our faith sustain us. AMEN.