
A Culture of Complaint Meets a Culture of Generosity

**A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
For St. Michael and All Angels Church
Dallas, Texas
Proper 25B in the Episcopal Lectionary**

Take heart; get up, he is calling you! -Mark 10

I want to thank the parish of St. Michael and All Angels today, and I want to thank the Foundation, for hosting my visit today. This is one of the fine parishes of the country, and you have been served by some excellent clergy. I am especially thankful to visit with my old friend, Hill Riddle today; you did well when you chose him for this interim and transition time!

I bring you greetings from the Cathedral Parish of St. Philip, my own church, in Atlanta. St. Michael's and St. Philip's have been two of the largest Episcopal parishes in the country in recent years. It's a pleasure to journey together with you today, a special journey in these often curious Episcopal Church times!

Actually, I want to talk about church today. I want to talk about our journey together. Maybe you've heard the old joke about the man stranded on a desert island. They finally found him, and when they did, they noticed three structures built behind him. "What's that place?" they asked. "Well," he said, "that's my house; that's where I live."

"Okay," they said, "What's this other place?" "Well, of course, that's my church. That's where I go to church!" "How honorable," they replied, "but what's this third structure?" "Oh," the man replied, "that's where I used to go to church."

There's always something wrong with where we are, isn't there? We do live in an anxious and complaining world, a world where it's all too easy to foster a culture of complaint. I don't know about Texas, but back in Georgia, we are right in the middle of a political season. Talk about complaining and anxiety. That's all I am hearing; what other people have done wrong.

That complaining is in our politics, it's in our households, and it's in our churches. If there's only one thing you hear me say today, if you remember only one thing, remember this: Jesus wants to deliver us from a culture of complaint to a culture of generosity. Jesus wants to take us from complaint to generosity.

Notice this familiar story today, the story of Bartimaeus. It's about healing, for sure. But it's also about church. It's about the journey of church.

Our old friend, blind Bartimaeus, greets us today. Surely you remember Bartimaeus? He is the poor blind soul sitting along the way while Jesus walks by, while everyone else seems to be having a good time. Jesus is teaching. The disciples are (supposedly) learning. All's a wonderful day in the neighborhood. All seems to be well.

But Bartimaeus, the blind beggar, is upsetting the crowd. He keeps interrupting with his illness. We all know such people. We have all heard them. The church seems to be getting along comfortably. Or maybe it's our school. Or the business, the

law firm, the organization, is purring along like a fine-tuned motor. But there is one person who is totally blind to it all. He is in the corner, poor and complaining.

And, frankly, his complaining gets on our nerves. Blind Bartimaeus sure got on the nerves of Jesus' disciples. Notice how the Bible says that Amany sternly ordered him to be quiet. Jesus' disciples tell the poor man to be quiet! Yes, the disciples start complaining, too!

The nature of a culture of complaint is that both sides complain: the original complainers, and then the ones -like me""who complain about the complainers! We are so blind ourselves that we don't realize how much we are complaining!

But Bartimaeus cries out even more loudly. Jesus stops, and Jesus says, "Call him here."

Something happens when Jesus says that. Suddenly, the attitude of the disciples' changes! They had been saying, "Shut up, shut up, shut up. Be quiet.' But something happens when Jesus stops for blind Bartimaeus.

When Jesus stops to recognize the blind man, the beggar man, the complaining man, the disciples stop complaining, too! In fact, they are transformed. Their attitude changes completely, and they say to the guy, "Hey, get up, take heart. He is calling you."

And the man does get up. He does more than get up. He jumps up. He throws off his cloak. He runs to Jesus.

They become a healthy organization right there.

The healthy organization, the healthy church, has had the courage to throw off the old. It has thrown away complaint and powerlessness. I believe this is what Jesus says to us today, "Throw off being a wimp! Stop whining! Get up!"

Yes, it is the disciples who are renewed in this story. Listen to what they say: "Take heart, get up. He is calling you." I believe these are the most important words in the story today. Take a look at the other places in the gospel where that phrase is used, "Take heart. Be of good cheer (they are the same word in Greek). Every other time the phrase is used, it is uttered by Jesus himself.

"Take heart!" was what Jesus told the paralyzed man who had been carried to him on a stretcher (Mt. 9.2.). "Take heart, be of good cheer," was what Jesus told the woman who had been suffering from a hemorrhage (Mt. 9:22). When the disciples saw Jesus walking on the storm-tossed waters, they thought he was a ghost, until Jesus said, "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid." (Mt 14.27). When Jesus was in the upper room with his disciples at the last supper, he told them, "In the world you will have persecution, but take heart. Be of good courage. I have overcome the world" (John 16.33).

"Take heart, be of good cheer," are the words Jesus uses to build up faith and to build up his church; and we need them in every generation in the church. But it is here, in this story, that Jesus' disciples themselves actually use the words. They truly become church.

When the disciples say "Get up!" they are actually saying, "Rise!" Be resurrected! Those are the words of the healthy church, aren't they? Take heart. Get up. That means "Faith!" Get up! That means "Resurrection." Faith and Resurrection.

This story is about the disciples becoming a healthy church, but obviously it is also a healing story. It reminds us that true healing requires several components; this story -simple as it is""carries all of those components:

1. We have the blind beggar. An open acknowledgement of pain. Have mercy.
2. We have Jesus stopping for him.
3. We have disciples urging the beggar to come to Jesus. (Now, isn't that what the church is supposed to be doing? -getting people to come to Jesus?) The third element is that the Christian community helps deliver the healing.

Then, the story takes an odd twist: Jesus asks a most direct question, "What do you want me to do for you?" To the crowd, Jesus' question must have seemed oddly unnecessary. Why couldn't Jesus understand already what the man needed?

Everybody else in town knew.

Well, Jesus needs Bartimaeus to declare, openly and positively, what the problem is. It is that probing question of Jesus which propels the final healing power of the event. Jesus somehow has the ability to strike at the heart of the illness and poverty of Bartimaeus. But the healing is complete; the discipleship is complete, only when we Bartimaeus claims it, when we voluntarily accept it. Jesus says, "Tell me, exactly and precisely and clearly, what it is that you want."

4. The fourth element of healing, then, is that Bartimaeus claims his healing with an honest and clear declaration of what he needs.

In the case of physical healing --of outward, objective healing-- it takes a doctor, an outward agent, to supply that resolution and truth. A doctor heals our physical illness by accurately and truthfully diagnosing the condition and applying the remedy.

Inner healing --of anger, past hurt, anxiety, depression-- often follows the same route. But some of the work must be provided by our inner souls, by ourselves. Do we really want to be made well? Or will we hide our real discomfort by focusing on something else? Will we admit what we really desire internally, or will we focus upon how all the people around us really need to change? I would be okay, says much of the world, if only everybody else got well.

I know that a lot of complainers live right here in the church. They are responsible for creating cultures of complaint in our churches rather than cultures of generosity.

I do not think it's simply "issues" that cause folks to leave church, or to become disenchanted. It's complaining. Most of us do not want to go to a church that teaches us to complain. (Actually, some folks really do want to go to a complaining church. I have found an interesting piece of evidence at the healthy church. When churches get healthy, often the complaining folks leave! They don't want to be part of church that does not complain!)

Lord Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on us.

It's one thing to ask that. It is a deep and common prayer. But when one sits there, day in and day out, complaining the prayer instead of believing the prayer, then it becomes an attitude, a habit of complaint. It becomes a culture of complaint. "I would be okay if only everybody else got well," is what we say today.

What happened to Bartimaeus was that, suddenly, everybody else did get well. He was accustomed merely to sit by the road and complain. And everybody else was accustomed to it, too. He would complain, and everyone else would tell him to be quiet. So went the world. It was a culture of complaint.

Until Jesus showed up. Jesus said, ACall him here. The crowd scurried about, called the blind man, the man jumped up, threw off his cloak; and in that moment, the cycle of disease was broken. Jesus interfered with the status quo. Jesus broke the culture of complaint and introduced a culture of generosity.

Take heart. Be of good cheer. The procession of Jesus, the journey of Jesus, is a journey from complaint to generosity; and it is a glorious one, indeed.

I know that for some of us, today is Foundation Sunday at St. Michael's. In a little while St. Michael's will recognize some of its special generous financial donors. I, too, salute that generosity. In my own church, and in churches across the country, this season is a season of stewardship. Folks are making financial pledges to the church.

It's reasonable to ask, "Why should we pledge to the church?"

Because this place, this community, this journey, is meant to be an alternative to the world around us, a world with folks sitting beside the road: poor, blind, begging, complaining. The Christian Church is the journey away from the culture of complaint toward a culture of generosity.

That generosity takes faith and resurrection. Take heart and get up.

Take heart and get up today. Where did blind Bartimaeus end up? He ended up healed, and he ended up joining the procession. He followed Jesus on the way. Let's join them: Jesus, the converted disciples, the healed Bartimaeus, and us.

The world needs us. The world needs generous Christians, not complaining Christians. Throw off the cloak of complaint and illness. Join the procession of generosity and resurrection.

AMEN.

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