
We Are All Beggars. This is True.

A sermon by Canon Wallace Marsh

Lent 4

John 9: 1-41

The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?"

You can almost envision the scene. The man's family and friends were gathered around his bedside as he lay dying. It must have been a historic occasion. They knew that this man's life had been changed and his words changed the course of history.

The man's eyes had been opened; he experienced something sure and certain and he had to tell the world. Yet, as he spoke about the power and the grace of Christ, his family, friends and neighbors began to distance themselves. The more this man spoke, the more the religious authorities of the day began questioning him about his words. They asked him to recant some of his statements, and when he didn't, they exiled him from the community of faith.

John's gospel says, "From His Fullness we have received grace upon grace" (John 1:16). This man's life had been changed by grace of Christ and he spent the rest of his living days proclaiming a message of grace. It was grace upon grace.

What it must have been like to be gathered around that bedside and watch him pass from this world to the next. Tears must have been flowing as he entered into a "peace that passes all understanding" (Philippians 4:7). There must have been a great deal of joy that he was now seeing the gracious Lord he persistently proclaimed throughout his life.

Yet, there must have been a number of people in his country that were happy he had finally passed on. Why did he have to share his experience of Jesus? Why did he constantly have to tell his story to the religious authorities? Why couldn't he just back down? The only thing that seemed to come from his testimony was conflict and division.

As his lifeless body lay on the bed, some think that his hand was in his pocket. Perhaps, one of the family members or loved ones reached for that hand to hold it one last time. As they pulled his hand out of his pocket, out came a small piece of paper. Written on the paper were the words, "We are all beggars. This is true."

The story sounds like the death of the blind man in today's gospel doesn't it? While there are a lot of similarities, I am not describing the death of the blind beggar whose eyes were opened by Jesus Christ.

The story that I have been telling is the story of a man whose eyes were opened. He is a man who preached about the grace of Christ, even in the face of opposition by the religious authorities. The deathbed scene that I described is an account of what happened on February 18, 1546 at Martin Luther's home in Germany. In his pocket, on his deathbed, Martin Luther, the Great Protestant Reformer had a small piece of paper with the words: "We are all beggars. This is true."

Luther knew that like the man born blind, we are all beggars in need of Christ to open our eyes. Like blind beggars we sit in darkness waiting for our eyes to be opened by He who is "the way, the truth and the life" (John 14:6). And when our eyes are opened, we see the unconditional grace and love of God. Luther says: "We are all beggars. This is true."

Yet, Luther was aware of his sin. Even in the midst of the Reformation debates Luther was conscientious of the last part of today's gospel. Jesus challenges those who claim to see. Jesus challenges those who claim to understand how God acts in this world.

Putting God in a box, placing limitations on God is a sure way to bring about blindness. The religious leaders (and people) do it time and time again in scripture. We do it all the time. We become blind to God's grace. Thus, "We are all beggars. This is true."

Today, some of us stand in need, while others of us think we stand in certainty. The fact of the matter is that when we come to this table we all come kneeling as beggars. We reach out our hands (as beggars) and receive a grace that sustains us in our adversity. We reach out our hands (as beggars) and receive a grace that challenges us in our certainty. It is a gift. It is a miracle. It opens our eyes and our hearts.

"We are all beggars. This is true."