

## “Are You Able?”

Mark 10:46-52

In her book *Speaking of Sin*, Barbara Brown Taylor betrays clergy colleagues like me by sharing a story that is too pathetically true. An Episcopal priest, Taylor had studied at Yale Divinity School (isn't that more elitist, of course, than the likes of us humble Presbyterians who went to Princeton). As amazing as that may sound she had the worst time finding resources in the library. Of course, Yale had and has amazing libraries. But the books she often sought were not to be found on the shelves where they were supposed to be, nor were they checked out according to the front desk. So, when she finally asked the librarian why this was so, he said that it was because the divinity school had the highest theft rate of any graduate school in the university.

“How embarrassing,” she said, “Why do you suppose that is?”

“Grace,” he replied “with a rueful look on his face. ‘You guys figure all has been forgiven ahead of time, so you go ahead and take what you want.’”

Some of you who were in previous confirmation classes of mine will remember me emphasizing this when the catechism that I taught you asked: “Do I have to be good for God to love me?” the answer being: “No, God loves me in spite of all I do wrong.” And while I'm sure that many a teenager's parents who said under their breath: “thanks a lot for that one,” the statement is truly at the core of the Gospel we believe. What we confess, we are forgiven. In fact, I'm sure because we don't always know to confess that God's forgiveness is reliable even without having said or figured out that we should declare our wrongs. But somehow that doesn't seem to be all that could be said on the matter.

What's wrong here, for those of us who have been around for a while, is that when we leave our talk about grace and sin here, we find that we've cast these concepts solely in terms of crime and punishment, judgment and penalty. When we think of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, we say that he has paid the consequential price of our wrong and thereby has rescued us from the hell we deserve. Well, I think it's probably quite right and faithful to think differently about Jesus being our sin sacrifice, our substitute for where the wrath of God gets loosed, but let's talk about that more next week. For now, I'd like to offer that when we reduce sin to that which deserves a consequence, and grace as a “get out of perdition free card,” we have missed the relational aspect of it. Yes, God does forgive us, but has what happened all been forgotten? If we are missing how relationships are broken because of sin we are not able to address it adequately.

There is much to commend in the story of the healing of the blind man, Bartimaeus, in this regard. His healing comes at the end of a four-chapter section of Mark's Gospel about how one can best be a follower of Jesus Christ. The section is framed by healings of people who are blind, Mark trying to emphasize how we can not only better see, but metaphorically, to better understand.

In the first healing, in chapter 8:22-26, Jesus actually has to touch the man twice. At first, the blind man sees but not clearly. And so Jesus has to try again. His healing

prefigures how Jesus' twelve disciples see him as their teacher and lord, but not all that well. They stumble along. They assert themselves but misunderstand. They find themselves tested but are handed back grades of D-. They want Jesus to rain down heavenly fire on their enemies instead of picking up his cross. They fight for position among themselves only to hear that the least is the greatest. They say that children should be seen and not heard, but have Jesus welcome the children for to such belongs the kingdom of God.

By contrast, the blind beggar, Bartimaeus, is the type of the disciple who was blind but then sees. He hears Jesus going by and begins to cry out. He's not the guy who knows a good deal when he hears of it, so much as he is the one who's down a ditch and knows that he has to cry out loudly to be heard. He knows that he has to cry out to get his life saved. He's willing to be seen for who he is, so that he can be made whole. No one can quiet him, making him behave, politely.

And so, Jesus asks what he wants. And he says that he wants to see. He's not asking for forgiveness of his sins (although there were as many folks in his day as there is in ours, who believed in karma that he must have deserved this for something he did). But by asking for sight, he is asking for the same grace that is trusted by Yale Divinity students or Princeton seminaries, as they pilfer their libraries. Jesus gives him that grace. And as he does so, he also tells him to go. He is free. But then Mark adds a little twist to the ending. Instead of going, Bartimaeus follows Jesus on his way. In other words, he doesn't go off on his own, but he becomes a part of the community of Jesus' followers. Notice, if you will, that the forgiveness, the grace wasn't something that ended only with justification. It ended with the restoration of relationships.

When Barbara Brown Taylor dwells on the very ungraceful practices of her fellow divinity students, she starts to rethink her previous notions of sin and grace. Actually, she doesn't cancel them and become one who believes that we have to be good for God to love us – a notion is that surprising believed in Protestant church folks even though our reformation watchword is that we are saved by grace alone and by faith alone. But she does consider what might be added. Instead of simply confession of sin and forgiveness, she adds penance and restoration to community.

Penance seems a catholic word to us, Protestants. And indeed, at the time of the Reformation when penance was in the hands of priests alone and their power in prescribing it and then holding it over the sinners head as if God's forgiveness was now in their hands alone, made Protestants allergic to the whole concept. But they were too reactive. Penance is about recognizing your sorrow for your wrongs, realizing that while your sin might well be forgiven, the brokenness that was its consequence still asks for repair.

She cites the Washington, D.C. Church of the Savior fellowship group of church communities that attends to that repair. One fellowship group has as its mission that of hosting groups as members wrestle with the demons of addiction. Another provides a health care clinic for those who otherwise wouldn't have a community to care for their physical needs. Another has built housing for immigrants who would can afford it on with the hourly wages they earn, a neighborhood for them, in effect, in the Adams Morgan area of DC. Another provided a permanent home for chronically homeless men who are not going to get better, but are also those whom God loves in spite of anything they may have done wrong. This a work of penance because it is noticing the truth of

our brokenness and then wrestling with ways to make amends towards an end of the restoration of community.

Don't get me wrong, I think that the forgiveness of sins is critical. Paying for our sins is a downward spiral that probably gets one into a vicious circle of measurement, grievance, vilification, and the like that can make the cure far worse than the presenting condition. And the assurance of pardon, the reliable grace of forgiveness gives us hope that we aren't just miserable alienated people. But it also gifts us with the ability to take further steps – to seek to do things that show the other our contrition, to gain resolve to make changes, to grow in our capacity to see that Christ's way in our world can build and/or restore community.

We are just about to receive three young people into our church community by their confirmation. It's a moment for rejoicing that they have a mustard seed of faith that says that they are God's children because God loves them, making that wonderfully known in Jesus Christ. But confirmation is about more than just their assent to some of our stock beliefs. It is about their election to be numbered as those who belong and add to our community. Over the years, they will see many flaws in us. They will see and participate in wrongs that we do and wrongs we don't undo. And they will have the good news that our sins are forgiven to hang their hats on. But they will also be good members of our community of faith if they can tell the truth of such things and when the truth is seen be a part of the work of the Spirit, building and restoring relationships that make the church faithful to Jesus Christ not just because we are condemnation free, but also because we value one another in our church community and we see our call as a church to be those who value others as a mission of our church, seeking to be an example of that for the sake of a world that God loves.

So, let's get to it. And I will ask now that Nathan Gillispie, James Laybourne and Jack Newton join me in this service from their homes and into yours.