

Proper 25 B
 St. Stephen's, Belvedere
 October 25, 2015
 The Rev. Richard Schaper

An Irrepressible Cry for Mercy—Heard!

(I love this story of blind Bartimaeus on the Jericho road. I think that it went right to my heart the first time that I heard it, and now each time I hear it resounds again as a vignette of faith and God's mercy.)

Last Sunday Wendy asked for a show of hands of those who like her are cradle Episcopalians. So today I'd like to see a show of hands of those who—like me—are latter day Episcopalians. Wendy also invited us to pause and reflect on what it is about the Episcopal Church that led us to choose this as our church home.

It's not as if I did not try anything else! I was raised a Lutheran. In the Lutheran church this last Sunday of October is observed as Reformation Sunday because it was on Halloween—All Hallows Eve, the day before the major festival of All Saints that we will observe next Sunday—that an Augustinian monk and Old Testament professor named Martin Luther nailed to the church door at Wittenberg his 95 theses for the reformation of the church. Theses such as: why should priests not be permitted to marry, and why should only priests drink from the communion cup.

The church that calls itself by Luther's name — the church in which I was raised—is a confessional church. That means that the Lutheran church stands by its theology, its confession of faith.

This is why I became so upset when, in a class at our Episcopal seminary in Berkeley I heard professor John Kater say that the genius of Queen Elizabeth the First was to conceive of a NON confessional church. How can a church NOT be confessional, I sputtered. For it is the very nature of a church to take its stand on its theology.

I learned that I was wrong about this, and this is how I came to understand the peculiar character of the Episcopal Church.

You see, at the time of Elizabeth the First, we were tearing one another's eyeballs out over disagreements on certain matters of religious belief. For example, one said that the bread and wine in the eucharist was actually the body and blood of Christ, and another said it was not. So they put one another on the rack until the other would change his mind, and if he would not, then they roasted him on a pyre and burned him to death.

In August I revisited in Oxford, England, the martyrs' monument in the Broad Street where in 1555 and 1556 **Hugh Latimer**, Bishop of Worcester; **Nicholas Ridley**, Bishop of London; and **Thomas Cranmer**, Archbishop of Canterbury were put to the flames in the name of Christian orthodoxy. Any Irishman will tell you how, a century later, Cromwell's armies put

Roman Catholics in their churches and then burned them down. Today's violent Muslim fanatics have little on the Christian extremists we were then, torturing and slaughtering over theological disagreements.

Seeing this, a sober Elizabeth the First decided that we cannot go on doing this to one another in the name of religion. We need to find a way, she was resolved, to pray together even if we do not entirely agree with one another on all tenets of the faith. It was in this search for a common prayer that the Book of Common Prayer was born—the same Book of Common Prayer out of which we worship today in the Episcopal Church.

So when I crossed over from being a Lutheran to being an Episcopalian, I was crossing over from a church that primarily believed together, into a church that primarily prayed together. This is where I have come down. For prayer is lived theology. The ancient liturgical principle holds true that “as we pray, so do we believe.” While serving as a hospital chaplain, I learned that the most revealing question I might ask someone was, “What are you praying for?”

Is this non-confessional communion that we have not the sort of church that our world needs today—a community of people who can pray together even when we might not agree on all matters? In an interfaith world such as our increasingly is, this seems particularly important.

In his lecture on what he referred to as “the Elizabethan settlement,” Dr. John Kater went on to share with us that when he was serving a small Episcopal church along the Hudson River he led a class on Sunday morning on the Apostle's Creed as a way of reviewing the fundamentals of Christian faith. In each class they considered a successive line of the creed, and he began each class by asking people to raise their hand if they believed in that line of the creed. There was only one line in the creed that everyone raised their hand. (Can you guess what it was? “He was crucified under Pontius Pilate”—the only historical fact in the creed!) That's when I realized that this was no longer the Lutheran church!

When I was 18 years old and went away to college, as we all do at that age, I was trying to find out who I was apart from my family, and what I believed apart from the religion in which I was raised. I resolved not to say anything that I did not believe, so when on Sunday morning the congregation recited the creed, there were whole stretches of it for which I held silence.

I speak the creed differently now. Instead of reciting it as a list of my individual beliefs, I recite it now as a formula of faith of the 2,000-year old community of faith of which I want to be a member. The creed expresses not so much my personal beliefs, as it does the faith of the church. This is the faith that I WANT to have, the beliefs that I want to be mine—even if I do not understand all of them! In repeating the creed in worship, our common prayer, I am affirming my solidarity with the faith community for which it stands—one community, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

This community of faith to which we belong goes back to the time of Bartimaeus; the blind beggar who we encounter this morning as Jesus and his throng are on their way out of Jericho on what will be Jesus' final trip to Jerusalem. This blind beggar sits at the side of road covering his vacant eyes with a cloak lest others viewing his unseeing eyes be similarly afflicted. There is

much about Bartimaeus' time and culture that is absolutely foreign to us. –But not the cry that comes from his heart. Bartimaeus wants to be made whole. He longs to be healed. He wants his alienation to end, and to be able to rejoin human community. So Bartimaeus cries out. “Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me!”

Those around him tell him to shut up, to hold his peace, to stay where he is, and as he is. But, undaunted, he cries out the more loudly. “Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me!” Amid the din of the passing crowd, Bartimaeus' plea falls on Jesus' ear and brings him to a halt. Jesus stood still and said, “Call him here.”

So they called the blind man, saying to him, “Take heart. Get up, he is calling you.”

Perhaps you know the refrain of the familiar gospel hymn: *Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling, calling for you and for me*. Bartimaeus throws off his cloak, exposing his blind eyes and comes to stand before Jesus, who asks him, “What do you want me to do for you?”

Now you might think that it is obvious what this blind person might want from Jesus. Duh!.... But it is essential that the afflicted soul put his longing into words and speak it.

This is Bartimaeus answer to the question, “What are you praying for?”

And his answer is: “My teacher, let me see again.”

Jesus said to him, “Go, your faith as made you well.”

Immediately Bartimaeus regained his sight and following Jesus on the road to Jerusalem.

Bartimaeus confession is: “I was blind, but now I see.”

I will wager that Bartimaeus' story is your story as well-- that there has been a time in your life when you sat by the side of the road and cried out to Jesus to have mercy on you. And Jesus heard your cry, and showed mercy to you. Why else would you be here this morning, if not for this?

In a just a little while, after the bread and common cup have been prepared, ushers will come down the aisle as if to indicate to you: Take heart. Get up. Jesus is calling you. Come with your empty hands upturned to receive what Jesus has to give you. And in your heart, your response to his question, What do you want me to do for you?