

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

If you accepted my suggestion last time I was here to listen to or watch Joel Ostein for a positive Gospel inspiration, you would know that he likes to start his talk with something funny. This week he told the story of an older gentleman who fulfilled his life-long dream to own a brand new Corvette. Finally achieving this great desire, on his way home from the dealership, he just couldn't help himself. He took his Corvette up on the Expressway and opened her up. Getting her up to 90 miles an hour, he looked in the rear view mirror and sure enough saw the twirling red and blue lights. He thought, "What the heck," and took off—100, 110, 120 miles an hour. Finally, coming to his senses, he said to himself, "Good Lord, what am I doing." He slowed down and pulled over, waiting as the State trooper approached. The trooper asked, "What were you thinking!" The man apologized, admitting he had gotten carried away with himself in his brand new, shiny Corvette. The trooper said, "Well, it's 4:00 o'clock and I go off duty at 4:30. If you can give me a reason for your speeding that I never heard before, I'll let you go. The elderly gent thought for a few seconds, then said, "Three years ago my wife ran off with a state trooper and I was afraid it was him—bringing her back." The trooper tipped his hat, smiled, and said, "Have a nice day".

You'll notice that our Gospel account begins with Jesus leaving the city of Jericho, where he had apparently been teaching, since St. Mark tells us that "a sizable crowd" accompanied him and his disciples.

Cities at that time were surrounded by walls, with doors or gates in them that would be shut at nightfall for security. So this crowd pressed in on Jesus as everyone was trying to get through the opening at the same time. Sitting outside the gate was this nameless blind beggar. No one apparently knew or cared to know his name. They only knew him as the son of Timaeus, "Bar" being the Hebrew word for son. Homeless people at that time would be kept outside the city gates since no one wanted them in the city. These desperately poor, forgotten, nameless people would gather at the gates of the city, hoping that a stranger passing through might stop, take pity on them, give them something to eat or possibly even a few coins. The situation was not unlike our present problem with homeless people living in the streets of our cities. And like today, the beggars were an embarrassment to most people. They weren't what residents wanted important visitors like Jesus to see.

Remember how Pope Francis kind of turned the tables on the powers that be when he came here. He insisted on sharing a meal with the poor and the homeless. So they kind of sanitized the poor, set up a tent, and invited them in to eat with the Holy Father.

In this event, among the beggars outside the Jericho wall was this nameless son of Timaeus who was blind. He was just one of many, desperately poor, homeless people. People passed by him without even seeing him or crossed the road so they could ignore him or grudgingly

flip him a coin or two to shut him up, despising him because he reminded them of how miserly they were.

Most of us don't like beggars, do we? They make us feel uncomfortable. We resent their intrusion into our lives. But, of course, out here where we live, we rarely, if ever, encounter a beggar.

I wonder how many of us would react if a beggar confronted us. I did learn the proper response to such a request some years ago.

I was on my way to dinner with a couple of priest-friends, and Sr. Mary Scullion, Philadelphia's Apostle to the homeless, had joined us. We were on our way to "The Spaghetti Factory" on Vine Street, not far from the Ben Franklin Bridge. A homeless man came up to us and asked for money. Sr. Mary asked what he needed it for. He said, "I'm hungry!" She said, "Well, come join us. We're on our way to dinner." She led the way with the homeless man who identified himself as Bill right past "The Spaghetti Factory" to a greasy-spoon diner a block away. We ate greasy hamburgers and greasier French fries, as Bill regaled us with tales of life on the street. It was quite an education.

Afterwards Sr. Mary explained to us that we should never just hand over money to a homeless person. Rather we should engage them in conversation; treat them with dignity; try to find out what they need; and if possible, help to meet that need.

That's what Jesus does in this encounter with Bartimaeus. This sightless, homeless man hears that Jesus is passing by. He shouts out, above the noise of the crowd, "Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me!" Everyone tells him to shut up. But he's desperate. So he shouts even louder, "Son of David, have pity on me."

Jesus hears this desperate cry. His heart is moved. So he says, "Call him!" Someone tells him, "Take courage! Cheer up! This is your lucky day! Get up! Jesus is calling you!"

The blind beggar, Mark tells us, throws aside his cloak, probably his only earthly possession, jumps up, and comes to Jesus. This is faith in action! This is enthusiasm! He doesn't just meekly come groveling to Jesus, as one would expect of an unclean outcast. No, he jumps up and stands tall before the Lord, throwing off anything of his old life that would stand between him and Jesus. Bartimaeus was poor and blind and despised, even hated by the crowd, but he had determination. He wasn't going to let anyone or anything deny him his opportunity.

Jesus' question that he addresses to Bartimaeus is a bit of a puzzle. He asks, "What do you want me to do for you?" I mean it's kind of obvious, isn't it? The man is blind. Why the question? I suspect it goes back to what Sr. Mary taught us in our encounter with the homeless man. Jesus is respecting the man and treating him with dignity. He isn't

assuming he knows what the man wants or what he needs. He gently and lovingly asks him, "What do you want me to do for you?" "The blind man replied to him, "Master, I want to see. Jesus told him, 'Go your way; your faith has saved you!'"

But Bartimaeus isn't going anywhere. St. Mark tells us, "Immediately he received his sight and followed him on the way." Bartimaeus' whole life had changed. He would follow Jesus the rest of his days, probably all the way to Calvary and becoming a witness to His Resurrection.

There are three powerful lessons to be learned in the story of this healing. First of all we see the power of determination. Bartimaeus was determined to get Jesus' attention. He didn't care what others said about him. He knew what he wanted, what he needed. He would not be denied what he believed was his destiny.

Determination is a powerful force in human life. Determination so often in life is the defining factor that separates success from failure. When a person simply refuses to be defeated by whatever circumstances he or she has to overcome, or refuses to accept the labels others put on him or her, something mysterious, even miraculously, happens. Doors open. Mountains are climbed.

Wilma was the 20th of 22 children. Born prematurely, doctors didn't expect her to survive. She did, but at the age of four, she contracted double pneumonia and scarlet fever, leaving her left leg paralyzed. She learned to walk with the aid of a metal brace.

When she was 9, Wilma removed the brace and began walking without it. By 13, she developed a rhythmic walk, and then she began to run. She entered her first race and came in last. For the next three years, Wilma came in dead last in every race she ran. But she kept on running, and one day she won. Eventually, this little girl who wasn't supposed to live; then who wasn't supposed to walk, ran in the biggest races of them all. Wilma Rudolph won three gold medals in track in Rome's 1960 Olympic Games.

It's always easier to give up than to get up. It's always easier to give in to others low expectations than to take responsibility for one's own life. There is power in determination. Every person who has ever made any significant contribution to society is a witness to that. Thank God for the Bartimaeuses and the Wilmas of this world who will not be denied by their circumstances or others low opinions of what they can achieve.

The other powerful lesson in this story is the power of Jesus' love. We see in this story that Jesus indeed hears the cry of the most dejected and rejected of society. People whom everyone else has given up on are nearest and dearest to the heart of Jesus. Think about it. Even above the noise of a crowd surrounding him, calling out to him, shouting his praises, he heard the cry of Bartimaeus and calls him to Himself.

Recently I visited a man in the hospital. He confessed to anger at his son who had become a hopeless drunk and drug addict. I had to explain to him how we males of the species have a hard time expressing what we really are feeling. What he was feeling wasn't really anger at his son, rather he was heart-broken for his son, and his inability to overcome his addiction, over which both he and his son were powerless. He started crying and said, "I do love him so much. But I can't help him," and he cried some more.

When his sobbing subsided, I told him, "Yes, you can help him. You can pray for him. And you can tell him that you are praying for him. You know that you love him. So you have to know that Jesus loves him even more than you do. I believe the Lord will hear your cry for him and he can and will bring his power to bear on those demons that are seeking to destroy him." Such is the power of Jesus' love. By the way, we bring that power of Jesus' love to bear every Monday evening in the Church from 7:00 until 8:00, praying the Rosary and the Divine Mercy Chaplet, for those struggling with addictions. Please join us and add your prayers to ours.

Our final lesson is what Jesus says to the now-sighted Bartimaeus, "Go, your faith has healed you". In miracle after miracle this is a constant refrain of Jesus. He doesn't claim the miracle. He credits the faith of the ones who are healed. Again, faith requires determination. It's easy to give in to despair and depression. It's easy to give up on yourself, your relationship, your job. It's easy to give in to sickness and pain and addictions and disillusionment. But determined faith does indeed bring healing, comfort, peace, victory, and a joyful spirit that can endure all things. Please, come to Jesus! Hear his call. Allow your faith to heal you.