

**Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa
February 25, 2024 – Elizabeth Bryce**

Reading: Mark 10:46-52

Sermon: What can I do for you?

Every once in a while, I will tell my kids what it was like to be me in high school. To say I was a late bloomer is an understatement. Sometimes I say I was lucky they didn't have car seat laws back then, because I didn't reach the recommended height and weight that we used to get rid of our kids' car seats until I was in grade 9.

So I tell them about the times that other students left terrible notes in my binders, or the cafeteria game where everyone put their leftovers and rejected lunches on my tray because "I needed to eat more". I tell them about the times I got locked in lockers or how bigger students used to pick me up and play "pitch and catch" with me in the halls.

And my kids will look at me and say "Mum, that's bullying."

But for my generation it was just fun and games. And for my parents' generation it was character development. We didn't talk about bullying so much, instead I learned to either fight back or suck it up and ignore it.

Steve already introduced the reason we hand out pink tshirts on this Sunday. Sometimes I hear people complaining that life is too easy for young people today – but I find most of them have plenty of character without being bullied to develop it. We encourage you to wear pink shirts on Wednesday too as you go about your day.

The story comes from rural Nova Scotia, where communities tend to be less diverse than they are today. But that doesn't mean they tolerate bullying in their schools.

David Shepherd and Travis Price decided to do something about a new student being bullied in their school.

'I learned that two people can come up with an idea, run with it, and it can do wonders,' said Travis Price, who was 17 at the time. 'Finally, someone stood up for a kid who was different.'

As they stood in the foyer handing out the shirts, the bullied boy walked in. His face spoke volumes. 'It looked like a huge weight was lifted off his shoulders,' Travis recalled. The bullies were never heard from again."

It's a story worth telling – so much so that it was written up in the local newspaper, then the boys were interviewed on CBC – and the rest is history. Now schools all across Canada have embraced "pink shirt day" – as well as offices, agencies, hospitals, fire stations and even churches.

It's sad that we even need to have a pink shirt day, or an orange shirt one, or red dresses or moosehide pins. We are already such a diverse and rich society, it's hard to imagine why there is always so much pressure for young people to conform or for bullies to try and make someone not what they want to be.

Of course, bullies come in all shapes, ages and sizes. They can be people who have a very strict notion of what is proper or normal – for some reason they feel threatened when they see someone who does not fit their norms. They don't ask the question why or what does this mean to you – in their minds, the answers are already carved in stone.

In the gospel story today, we see Jesus acting as an ally for a man who was disabled – disabled not by his lack of sight, mind you, but by the attitudes of the people around him. Jesus and his disciples were just preparing to leave Jericho, when a blind man named Bartimaeus, called out to Jesus.

The man was disabled, and made his living begging by the side of the road. When he cried out to Jesus asking for mercy, the townspeople tried to hush him: "Stop making us look bad," they said "a great man like him has no time for a loser like you!" It wasn't a pink shirt this time, it was something Bartimaeus lived with day after day. This probably wasn't the first time his neighbours told him to shut up and go away. But that just made Bartimaeus yell even louder.

"Jesus have mercy on me."

Jesus stopped in his tracks and said: "Bring him to me." And then he did something that always surprises me, every time I read this story. He said to Bartimaeus "What do you want me to do for you?"

I mean isn't it obvious? The man has been blind from birth, and that disability kept him from living a normal life. Unfortunately, it wasn't just the physical inability to see that held him back, it was the social stigma. Everyone thought his disability must be some kind of punishment or something he or his parents had done wrong. As if blindness was contagious, they didn't want to be infected by him.

But Jesus hearing him cry out, seeing his desperation, knowing his situation, still asked him: "What can I do for you?"

Of course, the blind man said "Rabbi, I just want to see."

Then Jesus said: "It's already done. Because of your faith your vision is restored. You are now healed in body and in spirit."

Jesus' question stops us in our tracks. As we go about our lives, we don't usually have the same patience he had. We go from one activity to another because we make assumptions about what is going to happen, we think we already know what it is someone else might want or need.

Jesus took the time to listen – he wanted to know what it was that Bartimaeus really wanted from him. He didn't assume that the man wanted to see, just because everyone else could see. He didn't assume that the man wanted to be like everyone else. "What can I do for you?"

They didn't use this word back in Jesus' day, but Jesus was showing all of his followers, what it means to be an ally. Like the boys who started pink shirt day, it's one thing to help someone, when you think you know what they need. It is quite another thing to put yourself in their shoes and to find a creative way to restore their dignity and self-esteem.

Jesus trusted that the man would speak for himself and name what he really wanted. Even the Messiah/the Son of God did not presume to know what was in the blind man's heart and mind – not without asking him first.

So often we think we have all the answers, the problem is we still haven't figured out the real question.

I was at a United Church gathering for Affirming ministries once, and we had as a guest speaker a trans man, who had been in the church all his life – through his childhood and his transition and even a call to ministry - a new chapter that no one really expected.

One of the audience asked: "What do you really want from the church? What can we do to include you?"

I'm sure we were mostly thinking – more rainbow flags, more affirming ministries, more participation in pride, more inclusive language in prayers and music.

So it took us all by surprise when he said: "I just want a place where I can go pee."

"All of your churches have two washrooms – one that says men or boys, and another that says Women and girls. Or they have the little pictograms with pants and skirts. When I go into the men's room, people look at me funny. And I won't go into a women's washroom either, because I am sure to shock someone. All I want is for churches to think about what it means to welcome someone who doesn't fit in those categories, and make a space where all genders feel comfortable doing what they need to do."

After hearing that story, we changed our washroom signs. Yes, some are still designated by the binary genders, but we also have marked All Gender washrooms where anyone can find the spaces they need to just be themselves.

Another time I was here at the office and someone came in after receiving the Christmas Cheer cards in December. I thought to myself "Oh, he's probably looking for more help, and figured out that I'm a soft touch."

I had made my assumptions, and I was already reaching for the box of vouchers when he said “I just wanted to come in and say thank you. I lost my job over a year ago, and I haven’t found something new yet. They either say I’m too old to train or too young to keep on long term. I feel like I’ve fallen between the cracks and no one cares.”

“So thanks for looking out for us” he said, “the people who fall between the cracks.”

I never even had the chance to say “What can I do for you?” because we had already done what he needed, he just stopped by to help me see what I couldn’t see on my own. All he needed, at that moment, was a chance to say thank you and reclaim his dignity.

When we are working with people who are at a disadvantage, we tend to think that we already know what they need. When what they really need is someone to listen to what they think the solution might be or to simply to listen to how they feel.

In churches and service agencies, I often hear the phrase “not about us without us.” I think it was coined in the Black Lives Matter movement*, when so many concerned non-black people started protesting anti-black racism - so much so that Black voices started to be drowned out. I remember a friend saying at that time “What I really need you to do is just listen... before you speak.”

What can I do for you? Jesus asked. In a sense he had already done it. Just by asking that question, we can see that Jesus already affirmed that Bartimaeus was fully capable of charting his own life story, that Bartimaeus was already seeing the truth so much better than the community around him, even without physical sight, and that Bartimaeus would be faithful to the God who was calling him forward on the journey to hope.

May we nurture our own ability to listen before judging, to hear before answering, to bless before shunning. May God give us the courage to live fully in the blessing of ourselves and others through this holy healing love. Amen

**Not about us, without us – was actually coined by those with disabilities. Thanks for the correction, Gaveen!*