Sermon: Who? Me? Text Mark 10:46-52 October 28, 2018

Rev. Steve Clifton Rideau Park United Church

As Jesus and his friends were leaving Jericho, a large crowd followed after Jesus on the road. A blind man named Bartimaeus was sitting by the roadside. He cried out and Jesus stood still in front of him. Jesus asked: What would you have me do for you…? And Bartimaeus said "What? For me? What do I need? Oh it wouldn't be right for me to ask for something. There are so many people in this world with worse troubles than mine. And it's just not right to ask for something for yourself. Seems selfish. Maybe Jesus you could help someone else….but I`m okay. Thanks for asking…"

Okay, so todays Gospel doesn't quite go that way. The blind man on the Jericho road is asked by Jesus "What do you want me to do for you" And Bartimaeus tells Jesus: "Rabbi*, I* want to see….Teacher, let me see again" Moved with compassion Jesus responds. Bartimaeus has his sight restored and he then joins the crowd and in gratitude for what he has received he follows Jesus on the way.

But it might have happened the other way. Bartimaeus asks for sight. But it can be hard to think about what we want, what we need…Often we have trouble asking for help.

Maybe we feel we are not worthy of help. Someone else is more deserving. But then the God we encounter in Scripture seems to be fond of those who seem less deserving. Moses was a murderer. King David was a scoundrel who would not pass muster in this time of the Me Too movement. Paul the apostle was once Saul the persecutor of Christians. So being deserving or undeserving is not part of divine equation. God`s grace is freely given to all.

Or maybe we feel we should be okay. Be self-reliant. Tough it out. Henri Nouwen once reflected that our world`s brokenness is helped along significantly by our unwillingness to show our weakness to one another. We all struggle sometimes. It takes real courage to acknowledge that and to ask for help.

Or maybe we figure that if we bring our troubles to God we will be distracting God`s attention from someone more in need, more deserving of God`s care. There are the hungry, the ill, the poor…It's like we believe God is a pie and there are only so many slices to pass around., only so much love and healing and compassion to be shared How can we ask God to use limited resources on us. Except God is not limited. God is limitless. God`s love has no bounds. Higher than a mountain. Deeper than the ocean. Our prayers and requests do not tax God or diminish God, or tire God. God can love you like you were the only person in the world. And then love the one next to you like they were the only person on earth. Then repeat that 7 billion times. With God there will always be more than enough love left over.

And then there is the sometime strongly articulated belief that it`s just wrong to ask for anything for yourself. "You shouldn't pray for yourself"…. I have heard those words or words like that spoken lots of times, like it was an expression of a Biblical truth or a well-known theological rule.

Actually the Scriptural tradition only encourages us to bring our deepest needs to God. The Psalms are full of personal, heartfelt appeals to the Holy One.

Jesus in speaking of prayer tells us to be like a widow who needs justice for herself and who persists, annoyingly, in asking for it. She does not plead on behalf of others but for her own circumstance…and Jesus invites us to do the same.

And in the gospel today we have Jesus asking: What do you want me to do for you…?

What might you say to Jesus when he asks: What do you want me to do for you…?

Bartimaeus is asked: "What do you want me to do for you?" He was a blind beggar. His life was spent begging for survival in an ancient city on the side of a busy road. When asked what he wanted he knew he needed healing. He could have asked Jesus to help someone else but he knew he needed Jesus` healing himself.

What do we need? Not someone else… what do we need?

Our church is moving through the process to become an Affirming congregation. We have a workshop after church today on how the be an Ally to the LGBTQ community. To LGBTQ people. About a year ago we met with about 20 of our young adults to hear from them about our affirming process and to glean their wisdom. This workshop was their idea. They have LGBT friends and hold good intentions but wanted to know better how to apply their good intentions.

In the affirming discussion we are engaged in we say that we the congregation of Rideau Park United Church are seeking to be a more welcoming faith community, inclusive of all, including those of different economic, ethnic, racial and religious backgrounds, sexual orientations and gender identities.

Sometimes in our thinking about being affirming it might be helpful to consider the question of Jesus:" What do you want me to do for you?"

Becoming affirming is about us. We sometimes make the error of thinking that becoming affirming is just about those we want to welcome. What do they want? What do they need? But No .Really being affirming? It's about me and you. "What do you want me to do for you?"

After participating in an Affirming Ministry conversation in her own church, where much of the conversation was about the LGBTQ community a gay candidate for ministry named Joy wrote this reflection:

Poem: "You are not affirming our existence" by Joy Cowan*

You
are
not
being asked to determine the legitimacy of the gay or transgender experience;

You are not being asked whether you "agree" with same-sex relationships;
Or whether you'd ever consider kissing a man/woman/genderqueer/transgender/genderfluid/ agender/kinky person (whichever scares you the most);

You are not being asked to understand that gender and sexuality are spectrums;

You are not being asked to debate whether gender dysphoria should be considered a mental health disorder;

You are not being asked to be fluent in the latest lingo (boi, transmasculine, poly, queer AF, etc.);

You are not being asked whether your parents or the 'church forefathers" would approve of same-sex marriage;

You are not being asked to decipher the "right answer" to whether The Bible approves of gay or transgender people.

Because this is not about judging people.

It's not.

You're not being asked to affirm our existence.

Instead, you are being asked – right now, today – whether YOU personally believe that ours is a God of love and acceptance;

Whether your version of Christian hospitality means welcoming everyone.

Everyone.

And really meaning it.

It's about taking into your heart Jesus' command to unconditionally love your neighbour as yourself.

It really is that simple.

The Affirming process helps a congregation to truly see how wide is their circle of love and inclusion.

And my prayer for all of us is this:
Spirit, draw the circle wider still and lead
us to a place where our love is without borders.
Amen.

Jesus asks “What do you want me to do for you?” Do we not want to have our hearts opened more to others, to have the courage to spread our arms out wider in welcome, to grow more in our understanding of the height and breadth and depth of God`s love for all people.

Being affirming isn’t just about people we see as different or who might feel excluded. It’s about us. How much can we love? What do you want me to do for you? ----------

There is a form of prayer, from the Celtic tradition. It’s a circle prayer. Imagine a stone being tossed into a still pond. It makes a splash and then, from that center, there are more circles formed, wider and wider they spread, beginning in the center it spreads wider and wider still.

In this form of prayer you first pray for yourself and your own needs. Then for those closest to you. Then for those a bit more distant. Then for those you kind of know, then for your community, your district, your nation, your world… The prayer spreads wide, but it starts with you.

Jesus asks what you want me to do for you.

***Hymn: 371VU Open My Eyes**

*Joy Cowan is a queer UCC Candidate for Ordained Ministry and is a student of Emmanuel College who is currently engaged in a shared ministry internship with St. Paul’s UC (Sussex), Hampton UC, and Andrew Donald Pastoral Charge (Salina Kirk and Southfield UC) in New Brunswick.