

“Count It All Joy!”

Job 42:1-6, 10-17; Hebrews 7:23-28;
Mark 10:46-52

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Pentecost 22, Reformation Sunday, dedicated to the Reformers in each generation and always to the glory of God!

“Count It All Joy!”

Job 42:1-6, 10-17; Hebrews 7:23-28; Mark 10:46-52

They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” Jesus stood still and said, “Call him here.” And they called the blind man, saying to him, “Take heart; get up, he is calling you.” So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. Then Jesus said to him, “What do you want me to do for you?” The blind man said to him, “My teacher, let me see again.” Jesus said to him, “Go; your faith has made you well.” Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Jesus is heading toward Jerusalem (and his certain death) through the city of Jericho. Jericho is the Palm Springs of Israel – without any of benefits – no golf courses, no Betty Ford clinic and no movie stars. It is desolate desert town located in a valley between the Dead Sea and Jerusalem. It is also the home of a poor blind beggar named Bartimaeus.

As our story opens, Bartimaeus is sitting beside the road when he learns that Jesus is walking by. He calls out, asking “**the Son of David**” for mercy. But the crowd knows this blind beggar. They have seen him every day. He might have asked them for assistance many times. They have little patience or even sympathy for him. They “sternly order” him to be quiet. But Bartimaeus cries out even more loudly until Jesus, hearing him, invites him to come over. **David’s son meets Timaeus’ son face-to-face.**

People who had never before seen Bartimaeus could have probably guessed his affliction. But Jesus, who on first meeting someone often seems to know more about them than they know themselves, makes no assumptions. Instead he asks, *"What do you want me to do for you?"* Jesus doesn't assume he knows; he does not even try to guess.

"What do you want me to do for you?" Here is one of the greatest questions in the Gospel – and in life. How many times have you found yourself in need of help – at a counselor or doctor's office, at a friend's home or in the pastor's study, and you knew you needed some help, but you weren't sure what it was you were looking for? Perhaps all you needed was Jesus – and his question - *"What do you want me to do for you?"*

With Jesus' question pregnant in the air space between them, Bartimaeus does not hold back. He doesn't ask for alms, a place to live, or a companion to help him get around. He asks for his sight. He doesn't want some small improvement in his life. He wants to be made whole. He wants to see.

Our city, our county, our state, our nation, and our world, are filled with people who are blind, suffering with poor health, hungry, homeless, poor, and afflicted in many other ways. For those of us who are suffering in similar ways, we often find ourselves overwhelmed by their needs – not nearly as overwhelmed as they are. When we do decide to help, we seldom start by asking them what they want. Instead, we usually begin by asking ourselves what we want to do for them, or what we think we can do for them. And what we usually want to do is some half-way measure: a few dollars instead of a job, more homeless shelters instead of affordable housing, a food pantry instead of living wages. It makes us feel better – we have done something. And they are slightly better off. But they have not become fully participating members of society. They are not "whole." Like Bartimaeus, each and every person wants to be made whole. They want to experience the fullness of joy.

The call of the Gospel is the call of Jesus Christ. The call of the Gospel is to be in making people WHOLE business. To feel broken, confused, hungry, blind, overwhelmed by anxiety and self-doubt is the place no one

wants to stay in. Each one of us, like Bartimaeus, desires in our deepest heart to be made whole. In so desiring, we all seek the joy of the Gospel.

Today is Reformation Sunday. It is the one Sunday in Pentecost Season when we put on RED – the colors of the Holy Spirit – and count on the Joy of the Gospel to lift us higher! On this Sunday, we remember that on October 31, 1517 (498 years ago), a German priest named Martin Luther took a hammer and a nail and pounded 95 statements (or theses) of protest against the Roman Catholic Church on the front doors of the Wittenberg Church where he served as the parish priest. He wanted people to experience the Joy of Christ – the Freedom of Christ! He wanted people to be made whole in Christ!

Twelve years ago, after viewing the film *Luther*, I was struck by the stewardship message of the film. Martin Luther was angry about how the church was raising money. He was right. It happened to be “Stewardship Season” when I viewed the film (also Reformation season!). While we are NOT in the business of selling indulgences to get everyone

into heaven and build a Basilica in Rome, we do spend time talking a lot about money. There is a connection between money and church; between how we handle our financial resources and how we respond to God's call to care for the poor and our families.

Martin Luther was passionate about stewardship. Two of his 95 theses directly addressed how Christians should give to the poor and care for their own as good stewards of what God has given them. He wrote in #43 and #46....

43. Christians are to be taught that he who gives to the poor or lends to the needy does a better work than buying pardons, and

46. Christians are to be taught that unless they have more than they need, they are bound to keep back what is necessary for their own families, and by no means to squander it on pardons.

On this Reformation Sunday our pairing Stewardship and Reformation theology should be natural. Instead of a traditional celebration of “grace alone, faith alone, scripture alone” or a homily-turned-history-lesson, let's tap into our

freedom in Christ to be good stewards of God's many gifts—including that of the gospel.

When we do, we discover Luther had quite a lot to say about stewardship. When he making the first real posting on line (or a door as it turns out), Martin Luther was directly responding to the abuse of people and their resources by the church in Rome. But the principles he applied then work now. We are called as Christians to give to those in need and we are to provide for our families before throwing money after the modern equivalent of “indulgences.” An interesting approach might be to lift up some of those modern things with which we try to fill the holes in our hearts, those purchases and lifestyles that we use to mask our fears, our senses of inadequacy, and our delusions. Stewardship is at the heart of the freedom movement in Christ Jesus. Nothing but Jesus Christ gives the security we so desperately crave. While reflecting being a Christian Steward on “The Sermon on the Mount,” Luther wrote:

Whoever wants to be a Christian must undertake good works as a means of serving God through his office or station, his money or goods, or whatever other possessions or abilities he may have, doing whatever possible to give God all the Glory.

As far as my secular person is concerned, I may and I should accumulate money and treasures—yet not too much, so that I do not become a greedy belly that seeks only its own benefit and can never be satisfied.

It is no sin to have money and property, wife and children, house and home. But you must not let it be your master. You must make money serve you, and you must be its master.

*That is what we call the Gospel with its fruits—doing good works, fulfilling your station or office diligently and faithfully, and undergoing all sorts of suffering for the joy of the Gospel (from Luther's, *Sermon on the Mount*, 1530-32).*

(As a side note, “The Joy of the Gospel” is the name of Pope Francis’ encyclical about money and the Gospel... I wonder if he has been reading Luther, too... no doubt!).

In writing on Reformation and Stewardship, ELCA pastor, Sharron R. Blezard from the Lower Susquehanna Synod in Pennsylvania writes:

“Go ahead and peruse your copy of *Luther’s Works*; check out more of his commentary on the role of biblical stewardship in the life of the Christian. For Luther, the gospel was primary, vocation was holy, and stewardship was **an integral part of the Christian’s life on this earth. Yes, we are free in Christ!**”

We are not measured or saved by our good works. However, as **thankful recipients of God’s** amazing grace and as part of our vocational calling in this world, we are to practice good stewardship of our time, talent, and possessions. We must carefully tend the gift of this earth and see to the needs of our neighbor.

Reformation Sunday is the perfect time to begin **looking at “re-forming”** our stewardship practices both personally and corporately. We may not try to buy peace of mind for eternity, but our culture still encourages us to try

and spend our way into satisfaction and contentment—to no avail.

What better Sunday than this one to examine stewardship in light of our (Protestant) heritage? (Rev. Sharron R. Blezard, “Celebrating our Freedom in Christ to be Good Stewards,” October 28, 2010, found in the blog “Stewardship Life”).

One of the great beauties of today’s Gospel story of Bartimaeus’ healing is that once he sees, Bartimaeus experiences the fullness of joy. In his deep gratitude for Jesus, he doesn’t simply get up and run to tell others what happened. No. He gets up and follows Jesus. He follows him to Jerusalem, to the cross, to the resurrection. On this Reformation Sunday, I hope and pray we count all our blessings of following Jesus. I hope and pray we stand up and follow him all the way to the cross and the way of resurrected life.

The other day I was talking with a man from another church who is a good friend. He told me how, in retirement, he now volunteers each week in a food pantry.

He loves serving others! I said, “Isn’t it beautiful how Jesus comes into our lives and makes sense to us in such clear and simple ways. I love Jesus’ touch on our lives.” He smiled and said, “Me too!”

Or as C. S. Lewis, author of the Tales of Narnia and Mere Christianity and so much more puts it: *“I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.”*

May we count all our blessings as JOY! “Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found, was BLIND, but now I see!” May you enter into the joy of the Gospel! Count it all as joy this day. Open your eyes. Witness the Resurrected Christ alive in your life and be a good Reformation Steward!

Thanks be to God for the joy we know in Christ Jesus our Lord! Amen.

Helen Keller, 20th century

"The only thing worse than being blind is having sight but no vision."

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