

Pentecost 23, Proper 25  
St. Paul's/Resurrección, Mount Vernon, WA

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## Gratitude and Need

Today's sermon is the last in a series on stewardship. We have heard about the stewardship of creation, we have heard about the stewardship of our political and civic action, we have heard about the stewardship of our relationships and our community, and now we are going to talk about the stewardship of our resources.

A friend of mine (and I use this story with permission,) who is not White, was in Costco the other day with her daughter. There was an employee offering samples of frozen fried rice. My friend was hesitant, a bit dubious of such a thing, and refused the offer. As she walked away her daughter heard the employee say, "Well, where you come from, I suppose there aren't any microwaves."

Now, I'm as scandalized as you, but I'm going to ask you to do something very difficult. Try to get inside the head of this employee. What story is she telling herself about my friend? On the basis of what is she making the assessments she is making? In short, what would bring her to say such a thing?

This is the story I hear behind her words. *This woman is obviously not from here because she's not White. She must be from somewhere else—somewhere substandard, not as developed as we are here in the U.S. She is just ignorant.*

However, I think the most poignant part of this, the pressing question is, whatever the story, what would be the response the employee sought? That's right—silence. She is ignorant, and therefore, she doesn't have a right to speak. In short, *"Shut up, you ignorant outsider!"*

How much of this kind of thinking is going on in the minds of the followers of Jesus on the road to Jericho in today's Gospel lesson? This man is blind from birth. Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind? That's what they asked Jesus in another similar encounter. Are they thinking the same thing? *Being blind is clearly evidence of God's displeasure. This man is cursed.*

This man is a foreigner. How do we know that? The name, "Bartimaeus," is made up of two parts, as indicated, "Bar" is Hebrew for "son of," and "Timaues"—well, who was Timaues? It's a Greek name, originally a literary character created by Plato. It was a well-known name but not from among the Jews. This man's father may have been Greek—or be thought to be Greek, whether if in fact he was or not. *This man is an outsider.*

When he calls out to Jesus, what do the people say? "Be quiet!" *Shut up. Don't speak. You have no right. You are a cursed outsider.*

Now, what happened next in Costco is telling. The daughter told my friend what the employee had said. My friend is not afraid of anything or anyone. She marched right over to the employee and told her, calmly and quietly, that 300 years before the United States became a nation, her people lived in their land. A little more than a hundred years ago the United States invaded their land and took it over. They made everyone citizens of the United States, and yes, she knows perfectly well what a microwave is, and that was a totally inappropriate comment. The employee apologized.

I'd like to know how she revised her story, the narrative she runs in her head about "outsiders and ignorant people." I hope she got the same kind of shock treatment the followers of Jesus had when he said, "Call him here." Jesus gave this voiceless one a voice. Jesus gave this cursed one an audience with God. Jesus gave this outsider a welcome. Can't you just see the chagrin on the faces of the others? It makes you wonder just who is blind and who truly sees. It makes you wonder who really needs to regain their sight—and whether or not they really want to.

Now, I am fully aware that we are all duly scandalized by what happened to Bartimaeus and to my friend. I believe with all my heart that we want to tell ourselves a different kind of narrative about the ones that society calls cursed outsiders. However, I would suggest that there is something that we do marginalize, often quite unthinkingly. I know it happens widely in our society at large, and the fact that you are all here today might indicate otherwise, but I think we marginalize the Church. We don't go so far as to call it cursed, but it is often hard for us to place it safely within the context of our society at large. The Church is an outsider to mainstream living. That's not all bad, because how else could the church speak a true word to the ills of the day? In a personal sense it makes it hard to engage it in the mainstream of OUR living.

I repeat: The Church is an outsider to mainstream living. That's not all bad, because how else could the church speak a true word to the ills of the day? In a personal sense, it makes it hard to engage it in the mainstream of OUR living. We step outside the doors and leave it behind. For example, how many of us think about the Church's teaching about economic and ecologic justice when buying avocados at Hagen's? Most avocados sold here are grown in Mexico where people are cutting down virgin forests by the square mile to grow them. Do we stop and think whether or not to support such an ecological economy? Neither do we think about the fact that there might be a link between the resources in our pockets and the needs of the church.

I am going to lay it out for you. Why do we give to the church? We give to the church for the exact same reasons we engage in any kind of ministry. We give to the church out of gratitude in response to need.

I did not say that we give to the church because the church is doing good things and we want to support them. Before I continue, I must say the church ought to and does do good things in the world. If we were not, we would not be true to the spirit of Jesus, who sent us out to feed the hungry, heal the sick, restore sight to the blind, give voice to the voiceless and proclaim liberty to the oppressed. Here at St. Paul's we do believe that God

is healing and restoring the world AND that WE are recipients of and participants in that healing and restoration. However, giving to support a cause is not gratitude, and it is only tangentially driven by need. It's really ego-driven, where we decide on the basis of what our own consciences decide what is worthy of our resources. Besides, we feel good about ourselves when we do that—ego again.

No, we give to the church out of gratitude to God. For what do we owe gratitude to God? It's easier to answer the opposite question. Apart from humanity's selfish and hurtful decisions and their effects, which we cannot attribute to God, for what do we NOT owe gratitude to God? I have a priest friend who is a petite woman. She put very succinctly to her church. She stepped to the front of the Chancel step, laid an offering plate on the floor, kicked off her shoes, and stepped into the plate. This is giving out of gratitude. If we really owe all, what does that mean? We give of our resources for the good of the people of God. The biblical guideline is a tithe. Karisse and I tithe.

I did say we give in response to need, that is, the needs of the church, not our need to give. Why is it that churches around the country are in the same boat we are, where financially stable people fill the pews, but the church coffers barely squeak by?

What are the needs of the church? Some of them are exotic and sexy, like our 6% Participants in Healing giving to charities locally, regionally, on the diocesan level and internationally. Most of them are not nearly so glittery: light bills, water bills, personnel, upkeep and maintenance, those sorts of things. Yet, if this is going to be a place to gather to be the Church, then these are the needs, pure and simple. It's not about you. It's about us.

My friend spoke up and told the story of her people of Puerto Rico and got an apology. Bartimaeus spoke up and received his sight. The Church is speaking up. How will you respond?