

"FROM THE RUBBLE OF LIFE"

A Sermon By

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106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
September 22, 1991

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INTRODUCTION

Somebody's Uncle Walter lived in Germany...Waldorf, Germany during the Second World War. During the war years, Uncle Walter wanted to build a house for himself, but all the necessary materials were reserved for the Army. You couldn't build a house for yourself. Now to a member of Germany's middle class a house is most important. Building a house and getting out of an apartment is a priority. And nothing - not even a World War - would deter Uncle Walter...even if it meant building a house and hiding it under a junk pile.

This is how he went about it. First, he bought himself a lot. Second, he then loaned the lot out for people to throw their junk on it. Then he would go out there at night and build - layer by layer of brick - and cover it over with the junk. When the end of the war came, there was a pile of junk, but there was almost a house under it...built by Uncle Walter. All it needed was a roof and in 1946, with the war now over, Uncle Walter raised the roof like a madman. He was jubilant and he said, "I beat the Nazis. I beat them. I got my house."

DEVELOPMENT

You've got to hand it to Uncle Walter. You have to admire the spirit of a man like that...to be able to build a house amid the rubble of life!

I suspect that Bartimaeus whom we heard about in today's Scripture Lesson was such a man. Remember his story? It couldn't have been much of a life for him sitting there day after day beside the road - begging. Today Bartimaeus could have lived a life of dignity and value even though he was sightless. Thanks to modern technology and educational programs for the blind, many sightless people are productive members of society. However, there were no such opportunities back there in First Century Israel.

Bartimaeus was forced to be dependant on the charity and generosity of those who passed by. Such dependency breeds despair and depression and anger, I'm sure. A lesser person might have given in and given up, but not Bartimaeus.

On this particular day one sensed excitement in the air. They said that a local celebrity by the name of Jesus and His disciples were passing by. A crowd of curious folk had gathered to see this man and His companions...passing through town on their way up to Jerusalem. The news of His compassion and His healing power had reached beyond Jericho to the outlying area. People wanted to see Him. They wanted to touch Him.

When Bartimaeus learned that it was Jesus passing by, he knew that this might be his only opportunity to do something about his situation. This was his one chance to escape from his life of despair and dependency. Thus he began to call out, "Jesus...Son of David...have mercy on me!" The crowd around him tried to quiet him down...settle him down. How often in life when a person tries to make a meaningful change do others seek to discourage him, but Bartimaeus refused to be silenced. "Son of David, have mercy on me" he kept shouting.

And you know, Jesus stopped! How beautiful are those three words in Mark's Gospel. "And Jesus stopped". In the midst of that pressing crowd, Jesus was willing to stop and minister to one needy soul. "Call him" said Jesus. When

they did, Mark tells us that Bartimaeus threw off his mantle and sprang up and came to Jesus. Here is a man who will not be denied. Here is a man who is going to have his deepest needs met, his fondest dreams come true...whatever it takes. Here is a man willing to take advantage of an opportunity even at the risk of looking foolish in front of a crowd.

William Barclay once said that there are three things which cannot come back:

"The spent arrow.
The spoken word.
The lost opportunity".

Bartimaeus could not know what lay just ahead for Jesus in Jerusalem. He could not know that the Master would be crucified there and that this opportunity would never come again. However, he did know that the opportunity was here... now, at hand...and he wasn't going to let it pass him by. He was determined.

Norman Vincent Peale in one of his books tells about a young man named Walter Harter. This Walter was a rather average young man with a slight limp who had grown up in a farming community. Denied the opportunity of a college education due to his family's financial circumstances, he set his heart on coming here to this city and working here.

He went to the local telephone company and borrowed the NYC telephone directory. He looked up the listings of various stores in this city and then decided to concentrate on a well-known chain that had 393 stores in the metropolitan area. He decided to write each of them by hand asking for a position. This was quite a project for a teenager with limited time and resources. He wrote 15 letters a day and he stayed with it day after day until he had written 393 letters without receiving a single reply.

Finally, after writing those many letters and not receiving one acknowledgement, he scraped together a few dollars and decided to come to the city and knock on a door or two. The first store he visited in this chain was a large one in the Times Square area. After listening to his story, the manager said that he should go to the office of the personnel department for the chain. Even if his letter had been received by a store, they would have passed his letter on.

Now Walter didn't even know what a personnel department was, but he followed the directions of the manager and went to a large building on Park Avenue. There he was taken to a stern-faced man sitting behind a large desk. This man seemed to be in charge of everything. After telling his story once more, Walter waited as the man behind the large desk looked him over for several minutes and then smiled and stood up. He pointed to a table holding stacks of letters. He said to the young man,

"Your applications are here...all 393 of them. We had the feeling that one day you would walk in here. We have a clerk's job waiting for you. You can start this afternoon."

Bartimaeus had that same spirit of determination. He refused to be defeated by his circumstances. He refused to be denied by the intimidation of the crowd. He refused to even be delayed. He cast off his mantle, sprang to his feet and came to Jesus. And then it was that Jesus asked him an interesting question:

"What do you want me to do for you?"

Couldn't Jesus tell that Bartimaeus was blind? What kind of a question was that for Him to ask?

TWO EXPLANATIONS

There are two possible explanations for the question that Jesus asked. Perhaps Bartimaeus' blindness was not his deepest need. Imagine that he had a child on death's doorstep or a loved one with leprosy. That might have been far more critical to him than his lack of sight. In other words, there are hurts that run deeper than a handicapping condition.

But let me offer another explanation for the question that Jesus put to him. "What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus knew it was important for people to clarify in their own minds what they really wanted.

Remember how He asked the lame man beside the pool of Bethesda if he wanted to be healed. The rest of that story indicates that the lame man probably preferred the comfort of his lameness to the burden posed by freedom and by responsibility. Jesus wanted him to be certain this was what he really wanted.

Thousands of years ago a young Chinese Emperor called upon his family's most trusted advisor. Said the Emperor,

"Oh learned Counselor...you have advised my father and grandfather. What is the single most important advice you can give me to rule my country?"

And Confucius replied,

"The first thing you must do is to define the problem."

Many unhappy people cannot put their finger on what is really causing their distress. Many unfulfilled people cannot even tell you what it would take to satisfy them. Many of us have no clear cut idea or conception what our real needs, our real desires, our real priorities are. And because we have never sat down and defined the problem or clarified our goals, we spend a lifetime wandering about anxiously with very little to show for our life's pilgrimage.

Have you ever noticed that successful people are very focussed about where they are headed. Take Lee Iacocca for example. He knew where he wanted to go. According to one biography, Iacocca boasted to his college classmates that he would be a Vice President of Ford Motor Company by the time he reached his 35th birthday. Seventeen years later - 13 months after his self-declared deadline - he achieved his goal.

A clearly defined plan for life can perform wonders. What a difference it makes when you know where you're going. If I were to ask you what was the deepest need in your life, could you tell me? If Jesus were here this morning and were to ask you,

"What do you want me to do for you?"

could you spell it out. Perhaps Bartimaeus was more fortunate than we. He knew

he could compete and cope in this world if he had but one thing - his vision. Some of us who have sight are held back by needs that we cannot even specify. Bartimaeus answered Jesus, saying, "Master...let me receive my sight." And Jesus said to him, "Go your way. Your faith has made you well." And immediately Bartimaeus received his sight and followed Jesus "on the way". Finally..last thing...

FAITH MADE THE DIFFERENCE

Note that it was his faith that made the difference. Jesus made that clear. But what kind of faith was it? Bartimaeus could not have passed a catechism of Christian beliefs. But he could pass a test on determination. He could pass a test on clarity of purpose. But even more importantly, he could pass a test on recognising in Jesus his hope and his salvation.

Notice what he did when Jesus healed him. "He followed Jesus on the way".

Back in the 1700s there took place a rather remarkable change in the life of an Austrian Count named Nikolaus Zinzendorf. Born into nobility, Zinzendorf had recently completed his training in law and was sent off to complete his education by touring European cities. In an art gallery in Dusseldorf he came upon a painting of Jesus. The eyes of the Master seemed to penetrate the heart of the count. Beneath the painting were these words,

"This I did for you. What are you doing for me?"

Count Zinzendorf was never able to forget those haunting words and those penetrating eyes. Within a few years he had retreated from public life to devote himself to a Christian community he had started for religious fugitives from Moravia. John Wesley was influenced by the Count and that community of believers in his early years.

Bartimaeus might have been haunted by the same words, "This I did for you. What are you doing for me?" There are many things he might have done after receiving his sight. We only know of one. And that is that He followed Jesus. And that's the bottom line. That's what faith is all about. It's a response to who Christ is and what He has done for the world.

HOW ABOUT YOU?

How about you? What would you like Christ to do for you? I hope that all of us are wise enough to see that our greatest need is for a new heart. Our greatest need is what Bartimaeus already had - a great faith. Out of that great faith stems a great determination, a clarity of purpose and a recognition of who Christ is and what He has done.

Who knows....perhaps there is one present here today who is seeking to build a life from rubble. A failed marriage. Regrets over a life misspent. Poor decision in work. Words spoken that have cut and hurt another. It's never too late to make a new beginning with Christ. He is passing our way. He stands ready - always - to meet our deepest need. Give Him the opportunity. What is it that you would have Him do for you? Think about. Pray about it.

PRAYER

Make us sensitive to Your spirit, O God, in these moments that come at the end of this service. Wrestle with each of us in the deep places of our lives. Strengthen us in our determination and grant us a clarity of purpose and a recognition of who Christ is and the vision to see what He has done and can still do in our world...and in our lives. And like blind Bartimaeus, may we be drawn to Him...to Christ in whom we see life's highest hope and its deepest meaning. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER: September 22, 1991

O GOD, OUR FATHER - in the mystery and the wonder of worship, we would draw near to You. Make us sensitive to Your spirit and to Your nearness in these moments of prayer.

ENFOLD us with Your loving care.

SPEAK to each of us the word that we need to hear, that special word that will lift us and make a difference in our lives.

MAY WE FIND in every act of our worship - in the sounds of the organ, the singing of the hymns, the anthems of the choir, the reading of the Scripture, the preaching of Your word, - in all of these may we feel that deep and abiding assurance of Your Eternal and Abiding Truth.

THOU GOD OF COMFORT, be near to those who may be feeling the burden of age, the pain of illness, the lure of temptation, the anguish of indecision, the inner turmoil of uncertainty.

WORK through nurses and physicians, social workers and teachers, counsellors and psychiatrists, writers and lawyers, public servants and government officials...all who influence others for good to bring hope and healing, peace and justice to our life together in this land.

OUR PRAYERS this day reach out to include loved ones from whom we are separated by distance, but from whom we are not separated by love and concern.

WE PRAY FOR each other...for those sitting near us in the pews this morning - those to our left, those to our right.

Grant that that person may be blessed with inner peace and tranquility, with that perspective of "higher ground" that worship can provide.

LORD, GOD - FATHER OF US ALL...we pray that the influence of another Sunday may be strong in our land, and that all who worship You this day may be given strong hearts to bear their burdens, willing hearts to bear the burdens of others.

DIRECT US in our worship. Enrich and purify our lives. Forgive us our sins. And make us ready for an adventure with Christ in a world that needs to hear His Word and to follow His way. In His name and spirit we pray.

(choral Amen)