

Questions of Faith
A sermon based on Mark 10: 46-52
Sunday, October 25, 2009
Plymouth Congregational UCC, Des Moines, Iowa

This year, the confirmation class is focused on “The Life of Jesus” (that’s our theme for the year—as opposed to, say, the Old Testament or Church History), so every other Wednesday night, you’ll find about 80 7th and 8th graders, 30 adults and me gathered together in Waveland Hall for an hour and a half to talk about the who’s, what’s, where’s, when’s and why’s of Jesus’ life. Well, that’s not quite true. We all get together to talk and question and wrestle with things for about 45 minutes, then the kids and their adult guides break off into small groups to talk some more, wrestle with the topic of the night, share their highs and lows, and make plans for their next service project or fun night. We all get back together for 10-15 minutes of closing prayers and “Ask Angie” time—one of the highlights of the evening.

If you’ve been in worship for one of our Ask the Minister sermons, you pretty much know what Ask Angie is like. It’s the same concept. Basically, the kids have to submit a written question and I’ll try to give a thoughtful, honest, and articulate answer. I try, anyway. Preferably, the questions have something to do with the topic at hand; however, that’s not always the case. Every week, I get a few less than serious questions like: “What’s your favorite color?” or “What’s your favorite hairstyle so far?” or “If you were stranded on a desert island and could only take one person with you, who would it be?” Those questions are fun. Weird, but fun.

If you are thinking that ‘Ask Angie’ time is all fluff, though, let me assure you that these kids also ask a question or two every time we get together that make me stop and think about what I really believe about all of this stuff we call church and faith and life. Oh, sure—we laugh. And we have a lot of fun. But we also deal with some pretty serious stuff during our two years together.

I think these questions are worth sharing, so I’ve picked some of the more thought-provoking ones to serve at this morning’s sermon. See what you think.

Here we go. Question #1: *“Do you think Jesus was depressed?”*

This one came from last week’s get together. Based on our readings the past couple of months from the gospel of Mark, I can understand why someone might be concerned about Jesus’ mental and emotional health. Here’s why:

Today’s story finds Jesus winding up a very long, very tiring, very demanding journey of teaching and healing, all so that people might understand better what this thing called the kingdom of God is, what it looks like, and how we can live there and experience the fullness of life.

The trip has been frustrating to say the least. His words and actions for the most part have fallen on deaf ears and blind eyes.

For example: Jesus invited the little children to come to him only to turn around and find his own disciples shooing the young ‘uns away.

He talked to folks about the kingdom of God being different than the way things are now—the last are first and the first are last and things like that—and then overheard (on more than one occasion) his friends bragging about how cool it is that they’re going to be there when Jesus rides into town and shows everybody who’s boss.

He healed the sick, gave sight to the blind, restored a deaf man’s hearing and invited the nobodies to join him on the journey only to discover that the disciples were too busy calling shotgun to pay attention to what was really going on.

Jesus had to have had a migraine. At times he had to be really annoyed –we do know that he lost his patience a time or two. But depressed? No. I don’t think he was depressed. Otherwise, he probably would have given up.

I know I probably would have given up; which is why it’s a good thing that he’s Jesus and I’m not.

That leads to Question #2: *“Why do you think Jesus didn’t just quit?”*

This one was from two years ago when we were talking about some of Jesus’ teachings and miracles and some kids (and adults) wondered aloud why he just didn’t give up after awhile and do something else—like sell insurance.

Basically, I think it’s because he knew he was doing what God called him to do. To do anything else wouldn’t have been right...so he stopped to listen every now and then, make sure he was still on the right track, and then he kept going. Even if it meant that he had to work with less than perfect people on a daily basis.

It is important to remember that he wasn’t always frustrated. There were some shining moments in there, too, where Jesus got a glimpse that his message was getting through. There was that rich guy a couple of weeks ago who asked Jesus what he needed to do to inherit eternal life. He’d done everything “right”—meaning, he’d followed the commandments and the law but knew that something was still missing. Jesus sized him up, listened to him and offered this piece of wisdom: you need to get rid of your stuff. That’s what’s keeping you from living. Interestingly enough, the guy didn’t argue or defend himself or make excuses because on some level he knew that Jesus was right...but he just couldn’t do it. At that moment, he’d rather have all of his stuff than a full, whole life. So he walked away from Jesus full of sorrow.

He got it.

And then there’s today’s story—a moment when Jesus gets a glimpse that there really might be people out there who not only get it but want to do something about it.

Jesus, his disciples and a large crowd of followers are headed to Jerusalem for the Passover. They are a little more than 10 miles outside of Jerusalem leaving the town of Jericho when someone starts yelling. Loudly. “Hey! Son of David! Have a little mercy, will ya?”

It’s Bartiemaueus—a blind guy begging by the side of the road, something he does every day, for hours on end. Today he wants Jesus’ attention...so he keeps at it, even when the crowd tries to shut him up. “Son of David! Hey! Over here!”

It worked. Rude as it was (and it was really rude), it worked. Jesus stopped, called Bartimaeus over. And asked him the same question he asked James and John a few miles back: “What do you want me to do for you?”

Note he didn't say: “Here's what I'm going to do for you” or “Here's what you need.” Instead, he asked the question of faith: “What do you really want here.”

What do you REALLY want.

And then he waited for an answer. Here's the moment in the story where everyone holds their breath. What would Bartimaeus do? He could copy James and John and ask for power and glory and all that good stuff. He could even say, “I don't know—what do you think I want?” He could have even asked for a little cash and a bigger blanket and gone back to his spot in the road.

But he didn't. Somehow—and I'm not sure how, maybe he'd heard about Jesus' miracles from someone else, or maybe he just felt it in his bones at that very moment—but somehow Bartimaeus knew deep down what he really needed from Jesus was the ability to see again. So, just like the guy a few chapters ago, he got his sight back.

Unlike the guy a few chapters ago, though, when Jesus said, “Go,” Bartimaeus stayed. He followed. He went with Jesus on the way to Jerusalem and the trouble that would meet Jesus there. Bartimaeus knew that a simple, “Hey, thanks, Jesus! See ya when I see ya!” wouldn't suffice for the gift he just received. He couldn't walk away. He had to follow.

He got it.

I love this story. And not just Bartimaeus' response. I love it that Jesus actually stopped when he had every right to keep right on going. He was headed into Jerusalem. He was headed into the eye of the storm. He had to be a little preoccupied with all of that. And besides, Bartimaeus wasn't exactly polite when asking for Jesus' help. Nobody would have blamed Jesus for ignoring the rude blind guy by the side of the road.

But he didn't. Even when things were looking bleak, even when he had to be questioning if anyone had heard a word that he had to say, even when he was on the way to the cross, he never forgot what he was here for or what he was called to do. And because he didn't give up, he gained one really faithful disciple. That's pretty cool.

I'm glad that Jesus didn't give up. I'm even more glad that God still doesn't give up.

OK, next question: *What's the best part about being a minister?*

I get this one almost every year. I can't speak for every minister—Matt, David, Faith, Steph or Jeanette might have a completely different answer than I do—but I can tell you what I think the best part of this job is: this. Or things like this: Confirmation, Stepping Stones, Worship, and moments where we get to stop and remember who we are and to whom we belong and what we are here for and maybe—just maybe—get our eyes opened and get all cranked up to follow Jesus into a more full, more whole life. When that happens, when the 'a-ha' bulb goes off, it's one of the most crazy, wild, wonderful things in the whole wide world. Kinda like Bartimaeus thing. This is holy.

And then there's the flip side of that question, too: *What's the worst part of your job?*

Again, I speak only for myself here, but hands down: paperwork or anything that requires linear thinking.

Here's another one from last year: *Do you really believe this stuff is true?*

You bet I do. And I believe that it matters, too. Beyond the shadow of a doubt, this is life and death stuff we do around here.

I have to admit that scientifically or logically, I don't know how some of these things happened. For example, I don't know how it was possible to form the earth in six days flat, but I do know that the earth and all things on it are a gift from God that we are called to care for. I don't know how virgins can get pregnant and have babies but I do know that this guy we call Jesus lived and taught and did some pretty amazing miracles to point the way to the kingdom of God—what this earth would look like if we took our relationship with God seriously. And I have no idea how

or if Bartimaeus gained his eyesight in the middle of the road that day but I do know that he saw something that most other people couldn't see. He saw the truth about his old way of life He saw what could be and he jumped at the chance to live. Seriously, not literally—that's how we read these stories. So, yes, I believe they are true. I don't know if they really happened but I believe they are true.

There's time for one more question, so I'll give one that, again, comes up pretty much every year: *what do any of these old stories have to do with me?*

Ummm...everything. When you can read this story and hear that there are people who have been there, done that, made mistakes, hung in there, made more mistakes and still served as vehicles through which God did some pretty amazing things—or, to say it another way, when you can read this story and see that God has worked with imperfect, strange, awful, wonderful, stubborn, cool people just like us for thousands of years—then maybe you can open your eyes to see that God just might still be speaking and working through us today, calling us to do some pretty amazing things, too.

Jesus isn't just a good idea or a great self-improvement program or the one thing that can help you form good habits for a happy, successful life. This may be a great place to hear a good story and catch up with friends and do some good work in the community—but it's more than that. This is a place where you can stop and listen and breathe deep and ask questions and yell for help if you need it and let this story get under your skin. This is a place where you aren't just asked to take a look at your life, you are encouraged to do so. The crowd is here to help you find your way to Jesus. Take heart. See. Live.

Bartimaeus. The blind guy by the side of the road. Who would have thought that somebody like that would be our model? But he is. And because somebody like Bartimaeus can see and change and be made well and whole, maybe we can, too.

There's a whole lot more Ask Angie questions where those came from-- a LOT more. Some of them are deep, some of them—well, not so much. If you'd like to hear more, I'd be glad to share them with you. Or just stop by some Wednesday night in Waveland Hall. We'd love to have you there.

And just in case you're curious, here's the answer to those questions posed at the beginning of the sermon:

Red.

What ever my hair looks like today is my favorite.

And if I was stranded on a desert island, well...that's between me and the confirmation class.

Questions. They are a good thing. Asking for what we need. That's good, too. May the confirmation kids and Bartimaeus serve as role models for the rest of us. And in the process, may our eyes be opened, may our souls be stirred to jump up and move, and may we be bold enough to live faithful, whole, transformed lives. Together. With each other. With God.

Amen.