Invitation to the Table

The closest thing we have to a creed are these words, *"We are Disciples of Christ, a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. As part of the one Body of Christ, we welcome all to the Lord's Table as God has welcomed us."*

Disciples have a uniquely relevant presence in our present culture of belligerent partisanism and sectarianism. At this table I invite you to join me in reaffirming who we are and what we are about. Number 355 in your hymnal is "A Disciples Affirmation." The words will be on the screen, or you can use your hymnal; but, let us read together:

As members of the Christian Church,
We confess that Jesus is the Christ,
the Son of the living God,
and proclaim him Lord and Savior of the world.
In Christ's name and by his grace
we accept our mission of witness
and service to all people.
We rejoice in God,
maker of heaven and earth,
and in God's covenant of love
which binds us to God and to one another.
Through baptism into Christ
we enter into newness of life
and are made one with the whole people of God.
In the communion of the Holy Spirit
we are joined together in discipleship
and in obedience to Christ.
At the Table of the Lord
we celebrate with thanksgiving
the saving acts and presence of Christ.
Within the universal church
we receive the gift of ministry
and the light of scripture.
In the bonds of Christian faith
we yield ourselves to God
that we may serve the One
whose kingdom has no end.
Blessing, glory, and honor
be to God forever. Amen.

MARK 10:46-52 (NRSVUE) ***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. 47When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" 48Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" 49Jesus stood still and said, "Call him here." And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart; get up, he is calling you." 50So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. 51Then 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." 52Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." Immediately he regained his sight and followed him along the way.***
The Word of God for the people of God!

In our mobile society, one drawback in preaching sermons in a series, is that attendance is not mandatory. You don't fail the course if you have more than three unexcused absences. But if you came in at the middle of the movie or left to go to the snack bar, some of this might not make sense. So let's hit the rewind button and scan through the key points.

Mark wrote to a non-Jewish audience about two generations after the first Easter—people who knew what the word messiah meant to the people of Israel: a military hero who would lead a revolution against Rome and reestablish Israel as a dominant empire with the same glory and status it enjoyed under David and Solomon. Messiah was all about God blessing Israel with power and wealth.

And Jesus' disciples thought he was that guy; but the Jewish oligarchy saw him as a threat to their own cushy lifestyle—don't mess with the Romans; we're quite comfortable, thank you. So, they worked a deal with the Romans and had him crucified—legally murdered. Ironically, about thirty-five years later a Jewish rebellion did take place, and the Romans had had enough. In 70 CE, Jerusalem and the Jewish temple were destroyed once again.

Mark's Gospel is written shortly after that, but his Gentile audience had had no association with Jesus or his disciples. To them, the idea of a crucified Messiah was the ultimate oxymoron. "Why should I believe in Jesus? Crucifixion is the empire's way of dealing with losers."

And so Mark begins with that question, and in the first part of his Gospel says, "Yes, the people who followed Jesus expected him to be the Messiah; but they were blind. Jesus never claimed to be Messiah or Son of God. And in Mark's transition, Jesus *three times* presents himself as suffering "Son of Man." You find this only in Mark and in the New Testament passages thought to be copied from Mark.

With the healing of blind Bartimaeus the curtain falls on Mark's transition from the understanding of Jesus as Son of God to Son of Man, from the blindness to discipleship, from ambitions of empire to humble servanthood.

The story of Bartimaeus is the bookend, matching the blind man whose story

began the transition. And there is another set of bookends *within* the story of Bartimaeus: he begins beside the road and ends up on the road—along the way.

Mark's gospel is full of these subtle connections—connecting the dots Chapter 4, "The Parable Chapter," begins with the Parable of the Sower. The Sower tosses seed, and some falls beside the road and the birds come and eat the seed.

And when Jesus explains the parable, the seed is the Word—the truth of who God is and what God's intentions and purposes are—the birds represent Satan, the adversary, who snatches away the truth before it can bear fruit.

Bartimaeus is beside the road and calls out to Jesus, calling him, "Son of David," which is a popular term for Messiah, who would bring God's kingdom with military power, as David had done. And though some New Testament writers reinterpret this title as appropriate for Jesus, Mark does not: those who regard Jesus as Son of David have not yet been healed of their blindness.

Bartimaeus calls out, "Have mercy on me!" As a blind beggar, he knows he's dependent on God's mercy. Connect the dots: the rich man asking what he could do. "No mercy needed here. I'm fully capable of doing it myself; just tell me what to do."

So, when Bartimaeus cries out, "Have mercy on me!" Jesus says, "Bring him to me," and "throwing off his cloak, Bartimaeus jumped up and came to Jesus." Like the original disciples, he left everything to follow Jesus.

And when the blind man says, "My teacher, let me see again," Jesus responds, "Go; your faith has made you whole." Connect the dots: "Go." Same word when Jesus said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan!" Depending on the conjugation it can mean "go away—be gone" or "fall in behind and follow, or, here, "You're free to go."

And Jesus says, "…your faith has made you well." It's the same word when Jesus said, "It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom," and the disciples respond, "Then, who can be *saved*?"

You begin to see the connections.[1] These are not just isolated or unrelated stories about Jesus. Mark isn't compiling a biography or journalistic account of Jesus' life. He has an understanding of the meaning and relevance of Jesus' life, and he has a plan; he is moving his readers along the trajectory toward his conclusion, interpreting the stories about Jesus as they apply to his readers' situation.

Mark concludes the transition with the healing of Bartimaeus. Bartimaeus is no longer blind; no longer beside the road… He is on the road, along the way that leads to self-giving, even to the point of death.

It is apparent that Mark understands Jesus' role and ministry as a reflection,

[1] While the idea of connecting the dots is my own, the specific dots I have inferred from Craddock, Fred B.; Boring, M. Eugene Boring. *The People's New Testament Commentary* (p. 151-152). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.

not of the Messiah image that emerged during Israel's exile in Babylon, but of Isaiah's Servant of YHWH imagery two centuries earlier. Jesus chose that approach knowing that, like the biblical prophets, he likely would suffer, not as part of his mission, but as a result of his mission of justice and mercy, which meant he had to confront Israel's unjust and corrupt leadership.

From blindness to discipleship; from ambitions of empire to humble service. Two final connections to nail down our grasp of Mark's transition:

First, compare the responses when Jesus asks, "What do you want me to do for your?" James and John ask for power and status, which Jesus cannot give: Their response creates anger and division among the disciples. That's the usual product of ambition and striving for power.

Bartimaeus, on the other hand, asks simply, "Let me see again." Remember, for Mark, blindness is a theme—an allegory: "Let me understand; let me see where all this is leading." The result? He followed Jesus "Along the way."

The rich young man asked for eternal life; the disciples asked for power and glory; Bartimaeus asked for understanding. And Jesus' response was the same for all of them: "Follow me." For the rich young man, the priority of possessions blinded him, as did the lust for power for the disciples. Bottom line: only Bartimaeus' deep longing for sight was satisfied. …from blindness to discipleship.

And finally: "Your faith has made you well," connect the dots. He said the same thing back in chapter five, when the woman with a hemorrhage touched the hem of his garment. It's the same word when the disciples asked, "Who can be saved." It means *to save, to keep safe and sound, to rescue from danger or destruction;* the corresponding noun is usually translated "salvation." It is related to the Hebrew word, "shalom," essentially a state of wholeness, well-being, security, and peace.

Part of today's blindness is what's called dualistic reductionism. It goes like this: everything about Christianity is reduced to salvation; and everything about salvation is reduced to what happens after death, all of which totally ignores the majority of what Jesus said and did. I don't know which came first, the reductionism or the dualism; but for now, first, the dualism ~ everything is separated (r-l) into heaven and earth, spirit and flesh, eternity and time, belief and human relationships; east is east and west is west and never the twain shall meet.

And everything over here (r) is about Christianity, and everything over here (l) is not. And so, if a preacher or a theologian talks about (l) social justice, that's not Christian; that's secular humanism—that's liberalism.

Then comes the reductionism: earth, flesh, time, and human relationships are tossed out the window as irrelevant to faith. Christianity is about getting into heaven when we die. Faith is confused with belief, and everything is reduced to

having the right beliefs. Being wrong is the unpardonable sin. The right doctrine will get you into heaven.

But, see, here's the thing: Jesus didn't say, "Your *beliefs* have made you well."

The woman with the hemorrhage believed Jesus could heal her. Bartimaeus believed Jesus could heal him. But nothing happened until they followed through on their belief; then, Jesus said, "Your faith has made you well." Nothing happens in life—individually or culturally—until people actually live as if they truly believe what they say they believe.

None of that diminishes the importance of salvation or negates any New Testament teaching about heaven and eternal life. But, although we have differing—even contradictory—ideas about what it means and what in involves, Christians in general accept that God offers salvation and eternal life through Jesus Christ. That's not the biggest problem in Christianity.

What separates and divides the Body of Christ is whether salvation and eternal life makes any difference in this life, If "our faith has made us well," if we "have been saved," how does that make a difference in how we treat each other—especially any who are different from us in ethnicity, culture, social status, economics, politics, sexual orientation, and even spirituality. We humans can divide over anything.

If Christianity is about following Jesus "Along the Way," then we have to take seriously those earthly things he did and said about how we treat each other; how we stand in solidarity with the poor and the marginalized, and how we love the "least" of those Jesus called brother and sister.

One of the reasons I'm still preaching and working part time is that at First Christian Church in Conway, Arkansas, I found forty people who are willing, each in his or her own way, to invest time, effort, and resources to make that happen, and are committed to getting better and better at it. I love our amazing little church.

The greatest challenge is that we're still one of the best kept secrets in town.

Let's fix that.

[Prayer Slide]