

Do We Recognize Restoration?

People of God – each and together sourced by the immeasurable Love that is God, I invite us to wonder together this morning: do we recognize restoration? Love has drawn us together on this autumn morning – via livestream and here in our house of worship – on land which Dakota peoples and others have loved for millennia before us and which we hope others will cherish long beyond us. As we move into this time of wondering, let's pause first to pray.

Holy Spirit, as you surround us with beauty and goodness in this space and among these people, we wonder (with the Psalmist, with Bartimaeus, and with Jesus) are we receiving and extending cries for mercy. Guide the meditations of our hearts and our minds as you reveal to us opportunities to take part in your restoration. Amen.

Friends, I'd like to begin this time of reflection by focusing on our gospel reading. From within the narrative of healing between Jesus and Bartimaeus, God calls us to increased awareness of cries for mercy – our own cries and those of our neighbors. I encountered good news in the Psalm for today, and we will invite that good news to wash over us and encourage us in the challenges we face.

Let's hear the gospel reading again in parts. As you listen, know that Bartimaeus' name means son of Timaeus and that Timaeus was a prominent, influential citizen. We heard: *"As [Jesus] 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!'"*

I have often wondered about the humility, honesty, and sheer grit it requires for any of us to ask for mercy – that is, for compassion, grace, kindness, help. Neighbors I encounter on the streets of our towns, publicly asking for assistance particularly cause me to wonder about that humility, honesty, grit, and suffering.

Bartimaeus' scolding neighbors attempted to temporarily embarrass him into silence. I imagine it takes a lot of faith in a higher power and love of self to not be shamed (that is, stripped of one's dignity) by scolding and ignoring (actions and inactions that seek to marginalize).

The story continues:

“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.”

Friends, *“Jesus stood still.”* Oh, that we would learn from Jesus the power of an intentional, fruitful pause! Time and again, we read of Jesus turning toward the other, looking and listening more closely. It is hard to turn, look and listen without an intentional, fruitful pause.

The same neighbors who had attempted to silence that man who hung out along the roadside (just OUTSIDE the city limits) were moved by Jesus' pause and words of welcome (*‘Call him here’*). *“Take heart; get up, he is calling you.”*

What a change of heart can result from the influence of the grounded, merciful teacher, healer and companion people experienced in Jesus!

Bartimaeus eagerly approached Jesus, knowing he was heard and welcome as he was. We heard, *“The blind man said to [Jesus], ‘My teacher, let me see again.’* Let us hear how Bartimaeus longed for restoration of something he had lost – the sense of sight he could still remember using to interpret his experience. I wonder: what is something integral to your life experience that you have lost? Have you lost an ability, a companion, a professional or personal role that has been removed by a job loss or transition, an empty nest, a divorce?

Finally, we heard: *“Jesus said to him, ‘Go; your faith has made you well.’ Immediately [Bartimaeus] regained his sight and followed him on the way.”* In other words, the faith with which Bartimaeus moved in his neighborhood – the faith that fueled his grit and openness to trusting the other – that faith was essential in any restoration he might experience (that of his sight and of all else that he might not have realized he needed restored).

In considering this text this week, I was inspired by words written in 1964 by Paul Simon. In one of five verses of the song, “The Sound of Silence,” (which has no refrain but simply builds in its tension around the human experience of silence), these were the words that struck me:

*“And in the naked light, I saw
Ten thousand people, maybe more
People talking without speaking
People hearing without listening
People writing songs that voices never shared*

*And no one dared
Disturb the sound of silence

'Fools' said I, 'You do not know
Silence like a cancer grows
Hear my words that I might teach you
Take my arms that I might reach you'
But my words, like silent raindrops fell
And echoed in the wells of silence"*

That needs no commentary from me.

I invite you to pull out this sheet. It says sermon insert on it. It's about cries for mercy (cries for compassion, grace, and kindness). We are hosting a Sing & Pray for Peace because there is TOO MUCH anxiety, pain and suffering in our world. If we put together the wars everywhere, the elections happening in our nation and elsewhere, the terrible devastation of natural disasters caused by the constant changing of our climate by us – we know there are cries for mercy. The question is are we receiving them? Are we hearing and sensing them. So the prompts on this page are:

"I hear/see/sense someone crying for mercy (maybe aloud, maybe silently). This is what I've noticed:" So here I am asking you to consider what you are receiving from another (silently or aloud).

And: *"My spirit/soul is crying for mercy (compassion, grace, kindness). This is what I am experiencing:"*

And you'll see below that I offer you options of whether you'd like to talk with me about this (because I am here to listen as your pastor), or if you're not sure if you want to talk about it, or you know that you don't and just would like me to hold it in prayer.

I invite you to put this in the offering plate later in the service. I would love to hold your thoughts with you. You may take a picture with your phone if you want to keep it for yourself to reflect as well. And you might not put it in the offering plate. You might only keep it for yourself – absolutely. So let us take a moment to consider (in fruitful silence, in an intentional pause) these cries for mercy from others and from ourselves.

When we intentionally pause for a short time, we realize that we could benefit from longer pauses as well. Would anyone lift a word or two of the substance of a cry for mercy? Not necessarily revealing if it is your own cry or someone else's, but for what are these cries? What kind of mercy or compassion are people crying for – silently or aloud?

Anxiety and loneliness crying out for a lifeline, companionship, being seen and heard, sharing and commiserating. People holding up signs asking for work – a call for opportunity, dignity, purpose. Relief from mental illness. Healing for our country in coming together.

We can be part of receiving and expressing cries for mercy.

Let's transition to some good, encouraging news. Our reading of Psalm 126 invites us to consider our experiences of restoration and of harvest. To restore is to **return**, to **bring back into existence or use**, or to **return something to its earlier or original condition**.

Even in light of Bartimaeus and his desire to return to the sight he had, I want us to recognize how much we change and grow (individually and collectively), and so encourage us to not get stuck in longing for an experience of restoration that will return us to an earlier condition. Instead, I invite us to zero in on restoring as bringing back into existence or use. Two synonyms of restore that I find most useful in the context of our shared ministries as St. Croix United Church are **recharge** and **revitalize**.

To recharge is to restore energy or spirit. To revitalize is to give new life, to reinvigorate. Locating yourself right now and here – in this autumn of 2024 in the gathered people of this congregation – how will you participate in the work of restoring (that is, recharging, revitalizing, reinvigorating)?

You might well ask, what is it that we are asking me to participate in restoring? Well, in our vision statement, we claim this: *“We envision an ever-expanding safe harbor where we thrive together and work with God toward love and justice.”* Imagine today how hearing and expressing cries for mercy can be part of our ever-expanding safe harbor. As all world citizens continue to move through this difficult time and as our congregation continues to grow and expand, how will you (a unique individual) participate in recharging, revitalizing, reinvigorating our way of *“being an ever-expanding safe harbor where we thrive together and work with God toward love and justice?”*

Let’s also consider the term harvest. **To harvest is to gather in or collect for use.** I love that harvesting doesn’t mean to gather in and set aside to be appreciated and accumulated. Farmers harvest crops for use by humans and other creatures – to fuel our living.

As we move deeper into this autumn, I wonder: **how will you be part of our harvest?** How will you be harvested by God – giving your energy, skills and even financial resources such that your offerings fuel our work of being the *“ever-expanding safe harbor”* of *“thriving together”* and *“working with God toward love and justice?”*

I hope that these questions also speak to other endeavors and relationships in our lives. Beyond our common life as this congregation, is there another context in which you long to participate in restoration – some recharging in your life, revitalizing, reinvigorating the dynamics of a situation or relationship? And is there another context where you want to make your energy, skills and resources more available to be harvested – to be used for good?

Mercy, compassion, grace and kindness are needed for the growth of deep peace. May we sow seeds of mercy, because Love and peace are counting on us. Amen!

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Psalm 126, Mark 10:46-52