

The scripture lessons for today both contain "happy endings." For Job, after forty chapters of agony, during which he lost everything and had all his ideas about God substantially shaken, this chapter finally brings release. Finally Job arrived at a place where he could admit that he had sought to understand and make sense out of what was God's domain alone...He repented before God and his life was restored. And there was, finally, a fairly happy ending: God gave him twice as much as he had enjoyed before the ordeal.

Through the centuries scholars have suggested that this "Happy Ending" of Job was actually added to Job's story as an attempt to make it more palatable. The story of Job losing everything and being badgered by his "friends" who accused him of bringing all his suffering upon himself is totally distressing. The readers needed for it to finally have Job rewarded for having been put through hell. Human beings *want* happy endings.

Life as we experience it doesn't always give us happy endings, at least not from our limited human perspective. Several years ago Russell Baker, of *The New York Times*, told in his autobiography (*Growing Up*) of a terrible experience in his life. Baker was five years old when one day his cousin found him outside playing and blurted out: *Your father's dead, Kenneth said...* "He is not," I said. *But of course they didn't know the situation, I started to explain. He was sick. In the hospital. My mother was bringing him home right now...* "He's dead," Kenneth said. *His assurance slid an icicle into my heart... I started running up the road screaming, "He is not!"*

It was a weak argument... I was almost certain before I got there that he was. And I was right. He (My dad) was 33 years old. When I came running home...the women descended on our house... With a thousand tasks to do, they had no time to handle a howling five-year-old. I was sent...to Bessie Scott's house.

Poor Bessie Scott. All afternoon she listened patiently as a saint while I sat in her kitchen and cried myself out. For the first time I thought seriously about God. Between sobs I told Bessie that if God could do things like this to people, then God was hateful and I had no use for Him.

Bessie told me about the peace of heaven and the joy of being among the angels and the happiness of my father who was already there. This argument failed to quiet my rage...

"If God loves me, why did he make my father die?" Bessie said I would understand someday, but she was only partly right... (from Pulpit Resource, 10/97)

No happy ending, but questions which were amplified throughout Baker's adult life and probably in many of our lives, too. No easy answers, and a lot of challenge. Life tends to be like that. In the midst of such pain and unanswered questions, how can we see our way to faith and life, and, indeed, a *finally* happy ending?

In the Gospel of Mark, a blind beggar named Bartimaeus called out to Jesus as Jesus passed by. At first the folks around Bartimaeus told him to hush up, but he kept on, even more loudly, crying for mercy. Then Jesus stopped and said that the man should come to him. Quickly Bartimaeus was directed to Jesus, who then asked Bartimaeus, "What do you want me to do for you?" There the man is blind, and Jesus asks him what he wants. Duh!!

"I want to see again." Jesus healed him, but unlike in the other miracle stories in the gospels, we hear that Bartimaeus followed Jesus.

It's doubtful that anyone would have faulted Bartimaeus had he simply thanked Jesus and then gone on his way. Surely he had a lot of living to catch up on! But he put his own agenda on hold and followed Jesus.

"What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asked.

Retired UMC Bishop William Willimon told about his Methodist annual conference's committee in charge of planning the overall programming and ministry of the conference. "Our Conference Council on Ministries was planning for its future programs of ministry. And what did we do? We didn't consult scriptures for our guidelines. We didn't pray and ask God to tell us what we ought to be doing. No, we sent out a questionnaire and asked people to tell us what they needed. This is the "where does it itch" style of Christian ministry. You tell us where you itch, what needs you have, then the church exists to scratch where you itch...

Willimon continued, "Is this what religion is all about? Getting your needs met? I remember a conference presided over by a well-known television evangelist. He proclaimed, "God wants to meet every one of your needs in life. Whatever your heart desires, bring it to the Lord in prayer." He then proceeded to tell how a woman couldn't find her red shoes one morning, but after she prayed to God, there they were, under her bed! ... What do you want God to do for you? ***The significant issue is not whether or not God helped her find her shoes, but whether or not she put them on so that she could follow Jesus that day!!!*** (William Willimon, *Pulpit Resource* Vo. 43 No. 4, p. 18-19)

A pastor shared: Years ago, I remember meeting a man who had had a very difficult start to his life. Through a loving mother, encouraging teachers, and a great scholarship at the university, he was now lifted out of poverty and established as a very successful attorney. A group from our church had asked him to take the case of an indigent young man who had run into trouble with the law. When the now rich, once poor, lawyer told me that he would not take the young man's case, he said, "I have thought that I ought to go back and do something for those who are less fortunate. But I've had to work so hard to be here, I'm so glad to be out of the ghetto and all of the poverty there, that I just think it's time for me to live a little and to enjoy the fruits of my success." (from Wm Willimon)

Of all the people Jesus touched and healed, one man, Bartimaeus, actually followed Jesus. Imagine all the cries for help that happened just this week: people in floods, automobile accidents, shootings, fires, not to mention bombings and the continued agony of being a refugee. So many have surely cried out to Jesus for help, but how many are willing to *follow* him? How many are willing to do what Jesus said was most important: "Love the Lord your God with all you have and are; and love your neighbor as much as you do yourself"? Are we willing to let our allegiance to our Lord change the way we go through life?

A sixth grade Sunday school teacher was telling his class about the arrest, trial, and crucifixion of Jesus; how the soldiers carried him away, how Pilate and the people conspired to do him in. A hand went up. "Yes, Bradford?" "I wanna know where the rest of them were." "Rest of who, Bradford?" "The disciples. Where were they when things got rough for Jesus?" "The disciples? Oh, they were long gone." "No, not the disciples! The rest of them. What became of all those folks Jesus helped, the ones he healed? Now that they had two good legs to stand on, two good eyes to see, what did they do when the soldiers came to get Jesus?" "Bradford, I don't know, I just don't know." "Yes you do," Bradford said, softly. "They were

just like most folks. They got what they wanted, and then they were gone." (from William Willimon, *Pulpit Resource* Vo. 43 No. 4, p. 20) (pause)

The story of Bartimaeus as he was healed and as he chose to follow Jesus invites us to ask of ourselves, "What do we want from Jesus today?" What do I want?---keep my family safe? answer all my questions? make this church successful? solve my problems? There are many options, but first we have to decide who Jesus is for us: whether Jesus is our magic wand, our Genie in a bottle to answer our wishes--or our *messiah*. Is Jesus our Lord or our errand boy? Are we faithful followers or pestering clients? Perhaps the question would be better phrased, "Jesus, what do you want from me?" "Jesus, what do you want of Winsted United Methodist Church and us, the people who make it up?"

We all like happy endings. In stories they make us feel good; they can satisfy our need to have loose ends tied up. There is satisfaction when the bad guys get caught and punished and the innocent ones are vindicated. In real life, however, there is a kind of happy ending opportunity to which we may all too often be blind. It is each moment that we are confronted with our own decisions as to how to treat Jesus, how to understand Jesus, and whether or not to follow Jesus.

Everybody has needs and wants. God can meet our deepest needs. But we are blind, deeply blind, if we turn away from God once we have received whatever it was we thought we wanted, or not received whatever it was we thought we wanted. To be called to Christ is to be called to faithfulness. It is not the easy way, but it is the way that leads to LIFE. If we will turn our hearts to follow Jesus Christ along the ways of our lives, we will discover, not the "happy ending" we might define and prescribe if we could, but the BEST ending ever possible, 'way beyond our imaginings. It is the ending and beginning which meet in the hands and love of God.

When I finish speaking we will sing the song, "I Was There to Hear Your Boring Cry," which speaks of the happy ending and blessing of our lives every day, because God is with us, through it all, from our births to our deaths and beyond.

Serve God, love God, follow Christ on his way. Trust God, even when the answers you seek do not seem to come, and find yourself deeply and forever blessed. Amen.

Job 42:1-17

42:1 Then Job answered the LORD:

2 "I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.

3 'Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?' Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.

4 'Hear, and I will speak; I will question you, and you declare to me.'

5 I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you;

6 therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes."

7 After the LORD had spoken these words to Job, the LORD said to Eliphaz the Temanite: "My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has.

8 Now therefore take seven bulls and seven rams, and go to my servant Job, and offer up for yourselves a burnt offering; and my

servant Job shall pray for you, for I will accept his prayer not to deal with you according to your folly; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has done."

9 So Eliphaz the Temanite and Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite went and did what the LORD had told them; and the LORD accepted Job's prayer.

10 And the LORD restored the fortunes of Job when he had prayed for his friends; and the LORD gave Job twice as much as he had before.

11 Then there came to him all his brothers and sisters and all who had known him before, and they ate bread with him in his house; they showed him sympathy and comforted him for all the evil that the LORD had brought upon him; and each of them gave him a piece of money and a gold ring.

12 The LORD blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning; and he had fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, a thousand yoke of oxen, and a thousand donkeys.

13 He also had seven sons and three daughters.

14 He named the first Jemimah, the second Keziah, and the third Keren-happuch.

15 In all the land there were no women so beautiful as Job's daughters; and their father gave them an inheritance along with their brothers.

16 After this Job lived one hundred and forty years, and saw his children, and his children's children, four generations.

17 And Job died, old and full of days.