

Hearing Voices We Don't Want to Hear, Seeing Those We Don't Want to See

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 24 October, 2021

A Reflection by Elizabeth Lee

Pentecost 22B

Psalm 34; Contemporary Reading: *Stillness Speaks*
by Eckhart Tolle; Mark 10: 46-52

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

Can we welcome all? Can we hear voices that we may not want to hear; see those that we may not want to see?

Over the past few weeks, we have been reflecting on what it means to be a welcoming and inclusive community. I am inspired by the mission of Wayside Chapel – “*creating community with no us and them.*” Can we be a community that welcomes all, such that there is “no us and them?” Where our judgements dissolve and we provide a safe place, where all are welcome? How might today’s readings invite us to deeply reflect and lead to us be more inclusive, individually and communally?

Listen to a retelling of today’s Gospel, with the ear of your heart. You could consider it as Midrash - the Jewish wise art that imaginatively delves into a text and explores its infinite meaning and offers insights for our current context.

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*(Elizabeth enters the character Eliana, mother of Barty).*

Let me introduce myself, I am Eliana. I am a proud woman from Jericho in Palestine, a thriving town some 125 stadia or 25km from Jerusalem, not far from the River Jordan. Now you may not have heard of me, for like most women, I am not only unnamed but also unseen in the Gospels. My name Eliana means “*my God has answered me.*”

However, I am sure you know my husband, Timaeus and my son, Barty, or as he is more widely spoken of, Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus. My husband’s name, Timaeus, means honour, so yes, Barty is son of Timaeus, but in my eyes he is son of honour. Not that you would know, the way he has been treated over the years. You may be familiar with the account in Mark’s Gospel, as it has been told and retold for the past 2000 years, but there is much more to the story. And as Barty’s mum I should know.

There was so much rejoicing when our son was born. We named him Bartimaeus. A much longed for child. He was such a contented baby, surrounded by so much love. Over the years he grew in wisdom and in favour with all who knew him. Yes, he lived up to his name, the son of honour. That was until that fateful day.

Now I won't go into that story now. It is quite gruesome and does not need a public airing at this time, but let's get one thing straight, it was not sin that caused Barty's blindness. At least it was not sin on his part, despite such rumours lingering.

Barty has, for many years, now spread his cloak out on the side of the road, in the hope that some of the well-to-do traders, political elites and pilgrims passing by, would throw a few shekels his way. I would bring him some food and sit with him for a while each morning, talking about our lives and the struggles we have living in a town where each day we are pushed to the margins, excluded because of our infirmities, our differences and the shame we feel. Over all these years I have never been able to share this with anyone besides Barty. Not Timaeus, nor the women who gather at the well each morning, nor anyone else.

There is a deep grief that rests in the hollow of my heart. My son, who had such a bright future ahead of him, struck blind in an instant. The guilt I feel as his mother, that I was unable to protect him from such a trauma. The shame I feel as I see him begging by the road. The heartache I feel as I witness the abuse hurled at him. Today, we mostly keep silence. It is hard, sitting here, alongside my son, watching as we are either ignored, heckled or ridiculed, for Barty's misfortune is still seen by many as the result of his presumed and gossiped about, sinful behaviour - and elicits no sympathy from those who pass by.

Do they not remember that the Law requires that the blind receive special care? What will become of him when I die? I constantly worry for him and his future, crying out to God to answer my prayers that he may find welcome somewhere.

But my own silent weeping was interrupted by an increasing buzz in the air. A crowd began to build. Barty was curious as to what was going on. I told him that I had heard that a man named Jesus had stayed in town overnight and that there was now a throng of people following him as he began to make his way to Jerusalem, along with so many others in these days before the great festival of Passover.

Barty lamented that he would never be able to make that pilgrimage, not given the shame he feels being a blind beggar. He, along with so many others, was excluded from the festivals, not by the Law but by prejudice. Poor Barty, he still had a sense that his blindness is a result of something wrong he had done. No matter how hard I have tried, I cannot convince him otherwise.

As the crowd approached, Barty had a sense that Jesus was near. He began to get excited, to call out, "*Descendant of David, Jesus, have compassion for me!*" O how those words pieced my heart. That was what I had wanted for my son all these years. For everyone who passed him by to have compassion for him.

Not pity, not mercy, but compassion. To feel with him in his suffering. I also wanted Barty to have compassion for himself.

But as he cried out the crowd tried to silence him, telling him to be quiet. That only made him shout louder. And I began to shout with him. “*Let him speak*” was my cry. “*Let him be heard!*” Alas our words were falling on deaf ears.

Then, suddenly, the atmosphere changed. Jesus had stopped! Jesus had heard! Jesus had noticed this voice calling from the roadside. And Jesus said “*Call him.*”

I was curious. Jesus did not come over to where we were sitting, nor did he call out to Barty directly, rather he spoke to the crowd, telling them to call Barty. Wow, can you imagine that! These people who one moment were berating and scolding Barty, now were encouraging and reassuring him and inviting him to approach Jesus.

Mind you, Barty needed no encouragement. Much to my astonishment he threw to the side his begging cloak, leapt up and headed for Jesus.

As he approached, Jesus said to him “*what do you want?*”

I was astounded! To this day, no one had asked my son that question. Everyone had either assumed they knew what Barty wanted, dropping a few coins or some leftover food onto his begging cloak or else disregarded him altogether.

But now, Jesus actually asked: “*what do you want?*” Jesus wanted to hear from Barty his deepest desires. I held my breath, wondering what Barty would say.

His reply, “*I want to see again!*” As simple as that. And for the first time in decades Barty could see. Tears welled up in my eyes. It was a miracle. In fact, multiple miracles all at once: Barty could see, Barty had been heard and the crowd both saw and heard my son, who had suffered for so many years.

For me the biggest miracle of that day was that the crowd had a change of heart. They finally heard, saw and responded with compassion to the cry of the poor. And true to my name God has answered me.

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The healing of blind Bartimaeus did not just happen 2000 years ago, it is happening across the world, across the country, in our communities, in everyday relationships and within ourselves. How does today’s Gospel speak to us as we desire to be a welcoming community, individually and collectively? For I don’t think this story is so much about Bartimaeus as about the crowd, the crowd that has been determining who could be heard and seen.

Last month Jo invited us to reflect on how the three elements of creation: God, humanity and earth interrelate. The following week Individuals from Glenbrook Uniting Church gave expression to how this played out in their lives. Then Gerard explored how living in right relationship happens at the collective level.

Today I would like us to explore our readings at both the individual and collective level, in relation to Restorative Practices and healing of communities; or in the words of Wayside Chapel, “*building community where there is no us and them.*” How can we welcome all even if our theologies differ, our politics differ; if some are living with mental illness that disturbs us, or have acted in a way that has hurt or offended us?

Firstly, I would like to start with ourselves, for in one sense that is the only place we can start. This morning’s Gospel offers us a metaphor for our interior life. Are there parts of ourselves - that once were full of life but somehow became damaged - that seek healing? Damaged possibly by what was done to us, or done to ourselves, or maybe just because something happened to us and no one was to blame; consequently we may find ourselves sitting on the beggar’s cloak?

Are there voices in our head telling us to be quiet and ignore our pain? Is there also a voice that cries from your gut? Is there an ear of the heart that can hear the question “*what do you want?*” with compassion? Can we extend to ourselves Rumi’s welcome offered in his poem “The Guest House” on the front of today’s worship booklet? Dave, in offering Jac’s reflection two weeks ago, noted that many of us have come to appreciate the benefits of the spiritual practice of meditation. Through meditation all sorts of thoughts arise, get noticed, acknowledged, and welcomed rather than forced into a corner or numbed. Thus, we gain a sense of wholeness from this self-acceptance and in turn, become more accepting of others.

Secondly, again on the individual level, are there people that we confine to the beggar’s cloak, literally or metaphorically? Are we silencing those making a racket in our vicinity? Do we have courageous and healing conversations with those that who may have offended us or we have offended? Can we listen with an open heart and validate the perspectives of another before sharing our differing views? Do we exclude people from our conversations - or are all welcome and included?

Thirdly, while it is true that the only person, we can change is ourselves, we are connected to others, be they our families, Pitt St or any of the myriad communities we are involved in. How do we respond communally when individuals or groups are sitting on the roadside? Are we part of the crowd?

One approach, an ancient one that has been revived in more recent times, but I believe is vastly underutilised, is circle processes. These circles have been part of Indigenous and ancient cultures across the world, including Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Native American, African, Asian, Celtic, Hebrew and Arab cultures.¹ Today they manifest as yarning circles, healing circles, peacemaking circles, sentencing circles, restorative justice conferences and the like. Collectively they are known as restorative practices.

‘Circles’ intentionally create a sacred space that lifts barriers between people, opening fresh possibilities for connection, mutual understanding, and collaboration. Maybe one significant step we can take in relation to conciliation with First Nations People, could be to sit in circle together, honouring the rich tradition of yarning circles that have been used by Aboriginal people for thousands of years, to discuss issues in an inclusive and collaborative manner.

In our discussion with Patricia Gemmill, following worship earlier this month, we were exploring possible practical steps we could take in relation to climate change. Maybe instead of making representation to our political representatives we could invite them into a circle process so all could share stories and listen together, to how climate change is a concern to us and how it is impacting on us and the world.

At Pitt St, 'Reflect and Connect' is a contemplative circle process in which participants draw on their life experience and wisdom, generating fresh insights and opening to new possibilities.

Listening Circles have been used in the Catholic Diocese of Parramatta as a catalyst for authenticity as they search for effective antidotes to the paralysing and silencing impact of the abuse that still hinders genuine healing following the revelations of the appalling response of the Church to sexual abuse of children.ⁱⁱ

In criminal justice contexts, restorative justice processes and sentencing circles step away from the adversarial approach and allow the voices of those who have been harmed and those who have caused harm to be heard and responded to. Through such sharing and interweaving of understandings, healing spaces open for both individuals and communities.

Circles could play a role in our Church Council governance and other meetings. When there are significant issues to be explored a circle process that values contemplative dialogue, and honours silence could facilitate deeper conversation and wiser discernment. This has been the Quaker way for centuries.

Circles bring together individuals who wish to engage in conflict resolution, healing, support, decision making or other activities in which honest communication, relationship development and community building are at the core. Sharing stories is prioritised. Stories are vitally important - they reflect our experience, affirm our identity and allow us to share significant meanings for our life and culture. Circles honour the presence and dignity of each participant, valuing the contribution of everyone.

Emphasising our connectedness, they support emotional and spiritual expression and give equal voice to all. Circles bring people together creating trust, respect, intimacy, belonging, generosity, mutuality and reciprocity. Participants share their experiences of joy and pain, struggle and triumph, vulnerability and strength to understand the issue at hand.

Storytelling engages people on many levels – we absorb stories differently to advice. Restorative practices and circle processes are never about “changing others” rather an invitation to change our self and our relationship with the community.

Then miracles big and small do happen. We hear voices we don't want to hear, see those we don't want to see. Communities are healed. Welcome and inclusion is possible. And in the words of Rumi, we can *“be grateful for whoever comes, because each has been sent as a guide from beyond”*. Our readings today are an epitome of restorative practices at work.

Let us pause and open our hearts to the invitations offered - individually and collectively - because we have listened to these sacred texts proclaimed today?

ⁱ Peacemaking Circles: A process for solving problems and building community.
<https://www.ousd.org/cms/lib07/CA01001176/Centricity/Domain/97/PeacemakingCircles.pdf>

ⁱⁱ The Swag <https://www.theswag.org.au/an-authentic-audience-listening-circles-confronting-sexual-abuse/>