

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of  
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**  
*Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on October 24, 2021 (Proper 25, Year B)*

There have been *a lot* of interpretations of The Wizard of Oz over the years. My history teacher in 8th grade laid out the theory that it was an allegory for the hot 19th century debate over monetary policy, as the country argued about moving to the gold standard. Oz being the abbreviation for ounce. Others have seen layers of religious imagery, with Over the Rainbow standing for the covenant between God and Noah after the Flood. Some see it as a feminist manifesto with Dorothy's independence pointing towards women's suffrage. And there are at least some people who see it as little more than a psychedelic drug trip, with the flying monkeys and technicolor fantasy.

The truth is probably somewhere in the midst of all of this. Or, more likely, there are multiple truths embedded in the story. But whenever I hear this passage about the healing of the blind beggar Bartimaeus, I always think about the Yellow Brick Road.

As disciples of Jesus we are all on a path, a journey, a road. Jesus' earliest followers referred to following Jesus as "The Way." It was code for discipleship, and so to be "on the way" was to be walking the spiritual path with Jesus. Which is where the Yellow Brick Road obviously comes in. Dorothy and her flawed companions are also on a path, not necessarily to spiritual enlightenment, but to find the wizard who will lead them all home. They try their best to stay on the road, but through many misadventures and missteps, they often find themselves Yellow Brick *off* Roading (which is a turn of phrase I probably shouldn't have used).

Bartimaeus begins his day sitting alongside the road, the way, into and out of Jericho. Presumably, this is where he sat day after day to beg. He is not part of the mainstream, rather he stands on the margins of both the road and society. He is literally and metaphorically in the gutter — ignored, isolated, invisible, untouchable.

Besides being pushed aside and passed over, the blind or the physically disabled or the mentally challenged were also lumped together as sinners. According to the prevailing wisdom of the day, they must have done something wrong to incur the wrath of God. Which left them even more cut off from society and also victim-blamed for the very condition that kept them apart.

Our theology has evolved, of course, but we still often look at the people in need of healing in these Biblical stories with a wary eye. We don't quite know what to do with them. Or at least we see them in the same way we might look at someone we encounter living on the street. With a mix of pity and revulsion, fear and gratitude that it's not us. Compassion is not always our first response — which is a hard thing to admit, especially as we sit here in church.

But what we frequently fail to see in these healing stories is that we don't just have more in common with the blind, the lame, and the leprous than we think — when it comes to our relationship with Jesus, *we are* the blind, the lame, and the leprous. We step off the path *a lot*. We lose our way and find ourselves feeling distanced from God.

Now, the Way is not always an easy path. Especially when our prayers don't seem to be answered; the miraculous healing we so desire doesn't happen; and we're left to wonder if any of this stuff we profess on Sunday morning is even true. But that's where Bartimaeus comes in. If this abandoned beggar retains faith and hope amidst his life of desperation, we can surely take even a hesitant step along The Way; to get up on that path to follow Jesus and see where it leads. To walk with him even in our spiritual blindness and neediness. With the confidence that he indeed leads us into the way of salvation and truth and hope and love.

Our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry, whose photo we just this week put up in the narthex — finally, often talks about the Christian faith as "the Way of Love." This isn't just a generic journey we're on. The Way of Jesus is the Way of Love. Or, as Bishop Curry puts it, the Way of Love is a way of life. And the first step to following Jesus along the Way of Love is to turn. Bishop Curry encourages us to everyday turn our lives "like a flower turning towards the sun, to turn our lives in the direction of God's love." Because when we turn towards God's love we are stepping on the path to freedom and peace, we are walking the Way of Love.

That's what Bartimaeus so desires and that's why we hear him crying out to Jesus. We can take heart in Bartimaeus' spiritual self-advocacy. When he hears that Jesus himself is walking past his usual spot on the side of the road, he doesn't cower in intimidation, as you might expect. Quite the opposite. He causes a ruckus by yelling at the top of his lungs, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" And when people in Jesus' entourage tell him to pipe down because he's causing a scene, he only yells louder. "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Like a flower turning towards the sun, Bartimaeus is turning loudly and audaciously towards the Son of God.

There are times to wait patiently upon the Lord, and there are times to boldly invoke the Lord's intercession on our behalf. These are both forms of faithful prayer. Bartimaeus reminds us that, dignified New England Episcopalianism aside, it's okay to be loud in our devotions. To occasionally yell for Jesus' help. I guess you *could* do this during the Prayers of the People, but we're probably talking about more of an internal yelling, a crying out of the heart.

The invitation embedded in our baptismal covenant is to repent and return to the Lord. To “re-turn” to the Lord. To once again, like that flower turning towards the sun each morning, turn back to the Way of Love that comes with following Jesus Christ. Whenever we turn away, and we all do, the invitation remains to turn around and get right back on that path, that way. Like Dorothy and her companions, we can continue to follow the Yellow Brick Road of faith or, as Diana Ross sang in *The Wiz*, we can “ease on down the road” with Jesus.

So if you are feeling particularly out of sorts, or if you are feeling disconnected from your faith, today is a new day. We can turn like Bartimaeus, we can turn like a flower towards the sun, we can turn towards the Way of Love by re-turning towards Jesus Christ. The recurring invitation to walk this road is the true miracle of the story of Bartimaeus. It’s less about the transition from *physical* blindness and more about the transition from *spiritual* blindness. And the reminder that whenever we find ourselves on the wrong path, we have a standing invitation to once again take those first hesitant, halting steps along The Way.