

October 28, 2018 - 30th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Homily by
Deacon Jim Olshefski

God, grant me

the **serenity** to accept the things I cannot change,
the **courage** to change the things I can,
and the **wisdom** to know the difference...

You may have recognized this as the beginning of the Serenity Prayer. This prayer was the foundation for my recent annual three-day retreat at the White House Jesuit retreat center in St. Louis. Father Ralph Huse, our retreat director, used the phrases from this prayer as the basis for each of his 30+ minute presentations, after which we retreatants would have time to pray upon his comments and reflect on their relevance to our physical, mental and spiritual lives.

I will focus on one phrase from the Serenity Prayer that is particularly relevant to today's Gospel:

[The] courage to change the things I can.

Change is threatening for most of us; change is challenging, difficult, even fearful. Fear is an instinctual, natural response that we humans have; our "fight or flight" reaction when faced with danger. At times, our response to danger can actually be paralyzing and we have that "deer in the headlights" look. Or we can respond to that fear with courage, not battlefield courage for which medals are awarded; rather, courage in trying to do the right thing in spite of our fear. That is the type of courage we see in today's Gospel.

Bartimaeus, the blind beggar, has lived his life in fear, a spiritual fear because, at the time of this Gospel passage, the Jewish theology was that anyone who suffered from any type of physical disability, such as Bartimaeus' blindness, was spiritually impure and had already been judged and condemned by God. As a result, individuals, such as Bartimaeus, were outcasts of society, fending for themselves by begging, constantly living in fear.

But, as we hear in Mark's Gospel, upon being told that Jesus of Nazareth was passing by, Bartimaeus has the courage to call out: "Jesus, son of David, have pity on me." By using the title, "son of David," Bartimaeus, the **blind** beggar, **sees** and acknowledges Jesus' true Messianic mission; whereas, the Apostles have consistently been "**blind**" to Jesus, the "suffering servant" Messiah. That Apostolic blindness was most recently displayed in last week's Gospel when James and John were vying for seats of glory on the right and left of Jesus!

I've been baffled by Jesus' initial question of Bartimaeus: "What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus could clearly see that He was dealing with a blind man. By this time in Mark's gospel, Jesus had already healed many individuals: A leper, a paralytic, a deaf man, Jesus had cured them all. So why did he ask Bartimaeus that question? On my retreat I was presented with a possible answer.

In his book, "The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything," Fr. James Martin writes that Jesus was helping Bartimaeus identify the **deepest desire of his heart, his holy desire**.

So, while Jesus' question of Bartimaeus "What do you want me to do for you?" may seem superfluous, it takes on added meaning when viewed from a spiritual realm. Fr. Martin continues: "Desire is a key way that God speaks to us...Holy desires are different from surface wants, like "I want a new car" or "I want a new computer."" In this Gospel scene, we are referring to "our deepest desires, the ones that shape our lives: Desires that help us know who we are to become and what we are to do. Our deep desires help us to know God's desires for us and how much God desires to be with us." Just as Jesus encouraged Bartimaeus to express his desire, so God encourages us to recognize and express our desires. For in recognizing our desires, we acknowledge God's desires for us.

Bartimaeus had the courage to convey his deepest desires, his holy desires, to Jesus. Because of his faith, his sight was restored. Bartimaeus was returned to society and, as the Gospel passage concludes, he "followed [Jesus] on the way."

Here is a story that dramatically illustrates how we can share our deepest desires, our holy desires, with God; at least, it was dramatic for me!

In the summer of 2000, I participated in a Boy Scout high adventure trip with my elder son, John. As we were descending Mt. Shavino, a 14,000-foot peak in Colorado, the trail gave way beneath me and I fell head-over-heels more than 30-feet down the mountain. Those who witnessed my fall were convinced that I was either dead or had suffered catastrophic injuries. Miraculously, I walked away without a scratch. Some months later, I had a revelation at Sunday Mass in which God told me that I was spared from death in that fall down the mountain, and now God asked me what I was going to do with my "second chance."

After deep reflection, and lengthy discussions with my wife, Mary, we had the **courage** to place our faith in God; to follow **my long-held desire** to help those in need, on the fringes of society. As a result, I retired from my reasonably successful career as a mid-level manager at DST and became a "professional volunteer," which ultimately led me to enter diaconal formation. Eventually, in 2014, I was ordained a deacon, to a "ministry of service."

By having the courage to express to God my deepest desires and God granting those desires, I have been led to where I am standing before you today.

Now, what are your holy desires?

Not everyone following the "**holy desires of the heart**" may have as dramatic a tale as Bartimaeus, or me, but unless you have the courage to place your faith in God and follow those "holy desires in your heart" you may never have a tale to tell.