



# THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF NEW CANAAN

SERMON – June 10, 2007    Dancing with the Star  
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## Isaiah 55:6-9

<sup>6</sup> *Seek the LORD while he may be found,  
call upon him while he is near;  
<sup>7</sup> let the wicked forsake their way,  
and the unrighteous their thoughts;  
let them return to the LORD, that he may have  
mercy on them, and to our God, for he will  
abundantly pardon.  
<sup>8</sup> For my thoughts are not your thoughts,  
nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD.  
<sup>9</sup> For as the heavens are higher than the earth,  
so are my ways higher than your ways  
and my thoughts than your thoughts.*

## Mark 10:46-52

<sup>46</sup> *They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. <sup>47</sup> When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" <sup>48</sup> Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" <sup>49</sup> 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." <sup>50</sup> So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. <sup>51</sup> 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." <sup>52</sup> Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.*

I was walking along a New York City side street, when I glanced up to see a burnished bronze plaque on an elegant old building: "The Explorer's Club, Founded 1904." I couldn't help wondering what in the world went on inside an "Explorer's Club."

I didn't know for certain, but I was pretty sure that no exploring was getting done in midtown Manhattan. In my mind's eye, I pictured a wood paneled library, oversized leather easy chairs, plumes of pipe smoke,

and little knots of grizzled old timers swapping stories about ice-trapped ships or enraged bull elephants.

I could picture former explorers sitting around, or descendents of explorers sitting around, or maybe even chroniclers of explorers sitting around, but I couldn't imagine real live explorers whiling away their days in midtown easy chairs. I couldn't believe Columbus, or Lewis and Clark, or Byrd, or Perry could sit around in a room like that for more than ten minutes without growing so restless they would want to jump out of a window.

For being an explorer isn't an hereditary title you get from your parents, or a degree you earn at University, or even a prize you win like an Olympic medal. You are an explorer if you are nudged, prodded, goaded by your restless nature to go out beyond the well-marked boundaries and explore. You are an explorer if and only if exploring is what you do. And in general, you don't do that in an easy chair.

Isn't being a Christian something like that? Being a Christian isn't a family label you get from your parents, a status you settle at your confirmation, or even an achievement you earn through study, piety or charity. Christian faith isn't a conclusion you finally "get," or a confession you finally make, or even a church you finally join - it's a relationship you engage. It's not a destination; it's a journey. It's not an embrace at the end of life's song; it's a dance all along the way.

You are a Christian if you are nudged, prodded, goaded by God's grace to go out beyond the well-marked boundaries and seek Christ. You are a Christian if and only if following in the way of Christ is what you do. And in general, you don't do that in an easy chair either.

Now this is an unsettling prospect for many of us, for we all love easy chairs. It's disturbing news, for instance, if you have experienced the grace of Christ and were planning on just retreating to your garden chaise lounge to savor the gift. And it's disturbing news if you have

been earnestly climbing the ladder of good works and were sure permanent reward and repose was just a couple of rungs away.

But isn't it ultimately good news for most of us? Do you sometimes feel so close to God your eyes well up with tears of joy, but then sometimes feel so distant you wonder whether you have lost your faith? Do your prayers sometimes seem so fruitful it was as if God were in your heart whispering answers, but then sometimes so dry you feel you're just talking to yourself? Do you sometimes read a line of Scripture and feel like God's plan for your life has suddenly come clear, but then sometimes you just lose the thread and the Bible seems like a foreign text. I know I have experienced each of these. Most ministers I've met have. Most monastics I've met have. Most seminary professor's I've met have. As Yale dean David Bartlett used to say, "I don't understand all this skepticism about being born again. I've been born again many times. On the other hand, sometimes it seems I'm just one headline away from questioning my faith."

Theologian Paul Tillich put it this way: Christians proclaim, "We only want to show you something we have seen and tell you something we have heard . . . that here and there in the world, and now and then in ourselves is a New Creation." ["The New Being" in The New Being, at 18]. Did you hear that? "**Now and then** in ourselves."

And so I find the image of faith as a journey or as a dance reassuring. I love the fact that the very time Luke describes the followers of Christ, he calls them people belonging to "the way." [Acts 9:2.] We journey along God's way as pilgrims. Sometimes grace opens a sudden way forward. Sometimes it seems like we're just marching in place. Sometimes we even slip back a bit. Or we follow God in a dance of faith. Sometimes grace leads us easily through our steps. Sometimes we slip awkwardly off the beat. Sometimes we lose contact with our partner all together. But there's always hope in a journey, and there's always hope in a dance. There's always hope that if we just keep walking, if we just keep dancing, grace will help us pick up the pace, help us pick up the beat, help us pick up "the way" all over again.

One of my best friends in seminary was John Leinenweber, an older fellow who had been a Benedictine monk for 38 years. I once asked John the essence of monastic life, and he responded, "a monk is someone who stands up, falls down, stands up, falls down, stands up, falls down and stands up. There is something important about "standing up" in the life of faith; and there's something inevitable about occasionally "falling down." But the essential distinctive in faith's pilgrimage is in the "getting back up."

Allen Hilton used to teach that Mark wrote his Gospel the way he did just because his little community of followers struggled with some of these same challenges. Mark's followers knew the legends of St. Peter and St. Paul and St. John, towering men of faith who had spread the Gospel in the face of certain death. But faith in Mark's community was young and fragile. What was wrong with them? Why couldn't they consistently "get it," "grasp it, "hold on to it?" Maybe they would never have the faith of the disciples.

So Mark wrote a Gospel emphasizing the human side of the disciples: disciples who didn't understand the parables, disciples who misunderstood Christ's mission, disciples who fled the foot of the cross, but disciples who never broke off their dance with God and who, in the end, danced closer and closer to the divine truth, ultimately finishing their dance as mighty heroes of God.

In fact, in today's lesson about the blind beggar Bartimaeus, you can see Mark teaching his followers a dance lesson: Mark is teaching all of us the steps of the divine dance.

It's a dance that lasts a lifetime and has an infinite variety of moves, but like all good dances, it can be reduced to a very simple pattern: When God comes and calls, we respond. When God asks, we answer. When God leads, we follow.

First, when God comes and calls, we respond. Blind, poor, and dirty, Bartimaeus sat day after day begging for scraps in a remote dusty town of a remote dusty province. But who should come calling but God himself, come to earth in the man Jesus, sweeping through Jericho to ask Bartimaeus to dance.

And when Jesus came by, Bartimaeus responded. Jesus initiated the dance by coming to Bartimaeus, but Bartimaeus responded by calling out to Jesus, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" The crowd tried to shut him up, but Bartimaeus just cried out more loudly, more insistently, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"

The dance continued as Jesus heard Bartimaeus and called him to his side. Once again, Bartimaeus responded, throwing off his cloak and springing blindly toward Jesus.

As the prophet Isaiah had written centuries before, "seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near." [55:6] Or as Paul wrote to the Hebrews, quoting the Psalms, "today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts." [4:7.]

We all have moments, inklings, sudden joys, when we feel a part, however faintly, of something greater than ourselves. Don't let the moment pass. Don't ignore Jesus' outstretched hand. Like Bartimaeus "Call upon him while he is near!"

As Simone Weil wrote ["The Love of God and Affliction" in Waiting for God, at 142]"Over the infinity of space and time, the infinitely more infinite love of God comes to possess us. He comes at his own time. We have the power to consent to receive him or to refuse. If we remain deaf, he comes back again and again like a beggar but also like a beggar, one day he stops coming." In the first movement of the dance, God comes and calls and we respond.

In the second movement of the dance, God asks and we answer. Jesus asked Bartimaeus, "What do you want me to do for you?" And Bartimaeus poured out his heartfelt plea, "My teacher, my master, let me see again."

Now, notice not just that Bartimaeus answered, but how he answered - for it is the very model of good prayer. Bartimaeus responded immediately, spontaneously, directly with language of his deepest need. No hemming and hawing. No pious preamble. No prayer book formula. Bartimaeus just let it fly.

There's an old story about a first year seminarian at Union Theological Seminary who signed up as a student chaplain at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital.

She had no sooner reported for her first day of work, completed her orientation and picked up her beeper before the beeper went off summoning her to the emergency room.

As she raced into the emergency room she found two, fourteen year old African-American girls shaking and screaming. Next to the girls on a gurney was one of the girl's infant son, a bullet wound in his head. Our seminarian bowed her head, racing through a mental check list of possible psalms and prayers. What could she possibly say or do that would be adequate in the midst of such fear and pain?

As our seminarian was earnestly composing and editing the right words in her mind, the doors to the room burst open and into the room barreled a 300 pound African-American woman, the aunt of the two girls. Grabbing up the heads of the two girls in her arms, the woman lifted her face and just shouted out, "Jesus, get down her! Get down here right now! Ain't nobody who can do anything about this but you!" And suddenly there was peace, and consolation, and a sense of God's Spirit with them in the room. A good prayer.

So, does your prayer life feel stilted, dry, or dutiful? Then model your dance on Bartimaeus. Imagine in your prayer that Jesus has heard your call and stopped still in his tracks to attend to you. As he gazes into your eyes, he asks simply, "What do you want me to do for you?" Open your heart and let your deepest needs, your most painful regrets, your most secret hopes tumble out. Add nothing. Withhold nothing. Edit nothing. In the second movement of the dance, God asks and we answer from the depths of our hearts.

In the final movement of the dance, God leads and we follow. Jesus restored Bartimaeus' sight, dismissed him, and swept on toward his death in Jerusalem. But now we reach the climax of the Bartimaeus story, for the last sentence reads: "Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way."

What did Bartimaeus do with his new found sight? Did he rush home to tell his friends and family? Did he linger to absorb the sights of the city he had groped through for years? Did he seek a reflection to look upon his own face? No, without hesitating Bartimaeus followed Jesus on the way.

It is an astonishing demonstration of discipleship, but we all know the story didn't end there. And we can surmise that for all his faith, like the rest of the disciples, like us, Bartimaeus didn't finally "get" or "grasp" Christianity that day. For we know that all of the disciples, and that must have included Bartimaeus, denied Christ, fled the cross, and questioned the resurrection. But like the disciples, and like you and me, Bartimaeus almost certainly continued with the dance. When God called again, he responded again. When God asked again, he answered again. When God led again, he followed again. Dancing closer and closer to the truth of God. Dancing closer and closer to that day when we will all stand face to face with our Lord.

<sup>12</sup> *For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.. [1 Cor. 13:12]*

Would you pray with me?

*Gracious God:*

*We are all here this morning because you first called to us. We all seek you because you first came seeking us. But Lord, we sometimes find our sight so dim, our faith so uneven, our understanding so limited. We yearn to grasp your truth, to finally master the way of love, but so often simple competence seems beyond our reach. So Lord we pray:*

*Our Master, let us see again. Let us see you when you reach out to us. Lord, if there is anyone here whose heart you have stirred in a hymn, or in a prayer, or in scripture or sermon this morning, let them recognize your call and respond to you now in their heart.*

*Our master, let us hear again. Let us hear your voice when you ask us what we want you to do for us. Lord, if there is anyone here whose heart is breaking over a troubled relationship, whose soul aches with guilt, whose spirit quakes with fear, let them hear your offer now and pour out their prayer in their heart for your healing touch.*

*Our master, let us follow you again. Open our minds that we may know where you lead. Is it to prayer? Then help us enrich our prayer lives. Is it to love of neighbor? Then warm our hearts to the task. Is it to support your church? Then give us generous spirits. Is it to study your word? Then quicken our curiosity.*

*Teach us to follow that we may know you. Know you that we may love you. Love you that we may join you.*

We pray in Jesus name. **Amen.**