

The Rt. Rev. Jeffrey Lee
 The Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost
 St. Paul's Episcopal Church
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Transparent Poverty

I serve as a faculty member of the College for Bishops, an organization in the Episcopal Church we fondly call “Baby Bishops’ School.” It’s a 3 year onboarding curriculum for newly ordained bishops, mostly helping new bishops deal with their inevitable imposter syndromes. And when I’m working with these new bishops I am always reminded of a period of self-doubt I went through in my own seminary days, questioning whether I had what it took to be a good priest. I wasn’t feeling worthy of what was about to happen to me, the trust and responsibility the church was soon going to place into my hands. It’s not uncommon for people who are preparing for ordination to feel this way – it’s a kind of ecclesiastical buyer’s remorse. In my case, I had the grace in my life to know a very wise and a very holy older priest in the diocese. And I – all earnestness and taking myself extremely seriously – I went to see him to seek his counsel and advice. Should I go through with all this? What if I’m a failure? How can I presume to do all the stuff a priest does? Who am I to wear the vestments and preside at the eucharist and offer pastoral care and all the rest?

He sat there in his wildly disheveled office in his faded and frayed clergy shirt, listening intently and nodding sagely as I poured out my mid-term seminarian’s anxiety. When I’d worn myself out with the all the worries and second guessing I could come up with, there he sat, just looking at me and there was this period of silence ... me thinking, that’s it, I knew it, he’s going to agree with me. Surely anyone with these kinds of doubts has no business being ordained. But instead, my wise old friend just shook his head and said, “There certainly are a lot of reasons not to go through with this, aren’t there? It’s a good thing all this isn’t really about you, you know. God doesn’t call those who are ready; God makes ready those who are called.”

In the gospel story this morning Mark tells us the name of a roadside beggar (a blind man in that culture could do nothing else). Bartimaeus is a counterpoint to last week’s story of James and John, a couple of insiders you remember, jockeying for positions of power when Jesus sets up his glorious kingdom. Bartimaeus has nothing to jockey with – he’s no where near the inside ... the cloak he “throws off” when he gets up to come to Jesus is probably the cloth he uses to collect whatever scraps people are willing to give him. He even leaves that behind. All Bartimaeus has is his desire to be healed. He wants to see. Nothing more and nothing less. He cries out to Jesus in a very public setting with a politically charged title: “Son of David, have mercy on me!” And for once, unlike his obstreperous disciples, Jesus doesn’t tell him to be quiet on that count. In his poverty, all Bartimaeus has is his desire, and in that impoverished desire he recognizes Jesus for who he is. A monk I know says that the only question that matters in the spiritual life is this, “What do you want?” I think that’s a central issue for many

people in our world. I don't think we know what we want. It's one of the problems with having too much.

This morning as we celebrate the Eucharist, we come to Jesus, not as beggars by the side of the road. Even if we don't feel particularly rich, we gather in a very well-appointed church, in circumstances that stand in stark contrast to the way most people in most of the world live. We are full, most of us, full of things and plans. Full of relationships and schedules. Full of hopes and dreams. And full too perhaps, of the worries and anxieties, the secret fears that are so often the flip side of all that fullness. But you know, our worries and fretfulness might just be invitations to discover the real hunger at the heart of it all. The hunger that only God can fill. The healing that only God can give. We cannot save ourselves. But Christ can. Christ does.

It is indeed a good thing that God doesn't call those who are fully equipped and ready, that God doesn't call those with no doubts, those who think they've got life all together, those who have never lost or suffered or been afraid. God doesn't wait until we've got it all together ... God would be waiting a very long time for that. No, our God calls us right in the midst of our real lives. God surprises us with God's presence sometimes when we least expect it. The mighty good news of the Christian faith is that we do not have to be good enough, smart enough, beautiful enough, strong enough ... not for God. That's the way the world does things. We're rewarded, we're promoted, we advance when we get it all together. Or at least put on a good enough performance to convince everybody that we do. But it doesn't work that way with God. God comes to us, God loves us, God saves us, heals us and helps us, not because we're ready, not because we've succeeded in being good, not because we believe all the right things, but simply and solely because we ARE. That's the good news of the gospel of Jesus.

Like Bartimaeus, like Paul and Mary and John and our mothers and fathers in the faith, that's all that is required. Knowing our need for God. In the most important sense, for Christians there is ever and only one priest, Jesus himself. That's the whole point of the Letter to the Hebrews. Through the cross and resurrection Jesus has consummated all priesthood, he has reconciled the world to God and so to itself. And all of us who have been baptized into his death and resurrection, all of us are called to share that work of reconciliation, that work of making God's love for this world real.

And to do that we need to know our own poverty – rich or poor, full or empty, healthy or not, we need to know just how needy we are. We need to know that saving the world is not up to us. All we need is to be people who know their poverty, who know our need for God. Like Bartimaeus. Like all the friends of Jesus. That's why the most prominent feature in this room is a dining table, a constant reminder of our need. This banquet table is a sign of the One who alone can satisfy our deepest hunger. So come, stretch out your empty hands, let us bring our longing hearts, and receive the Bread of Life.